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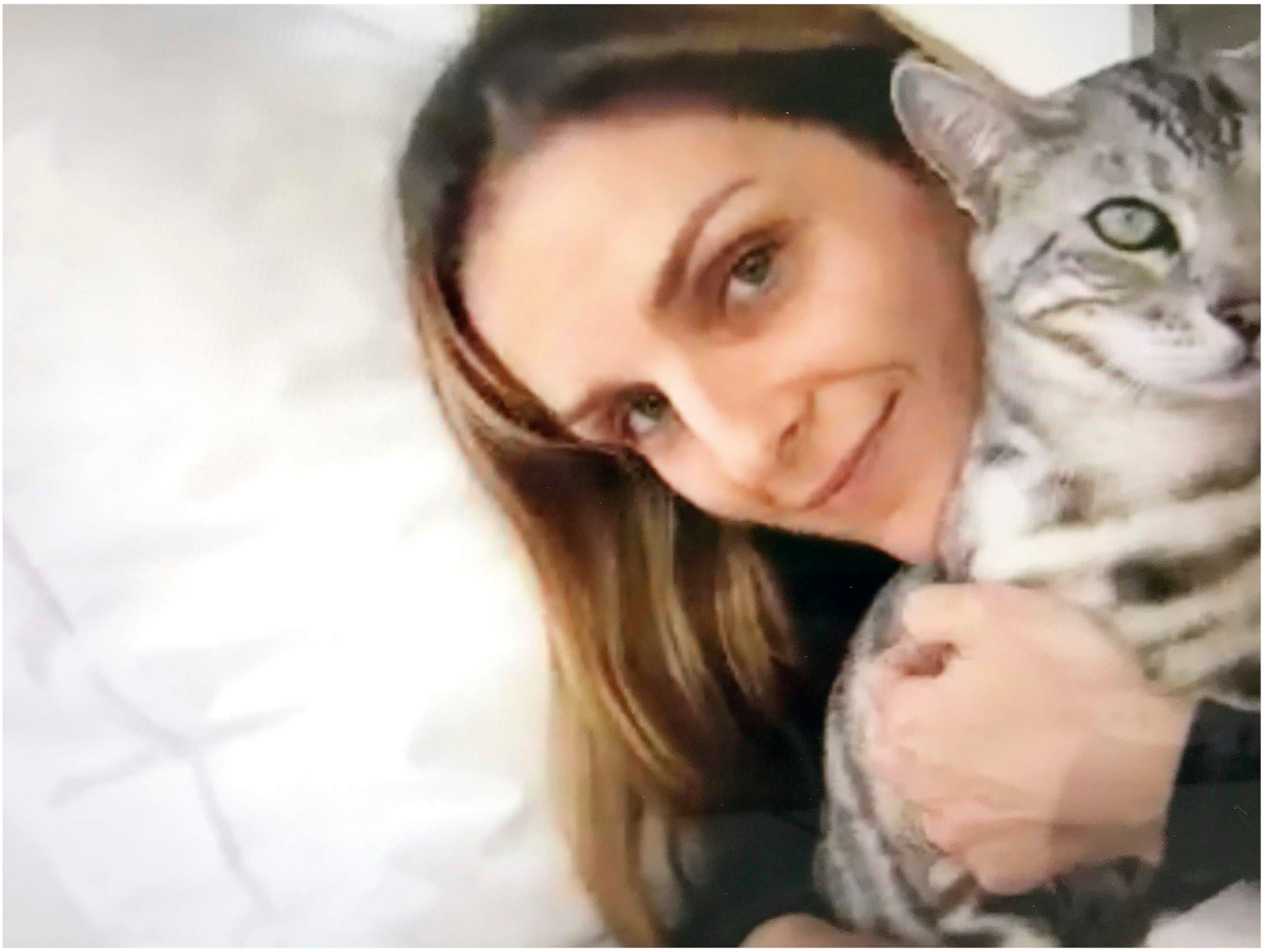

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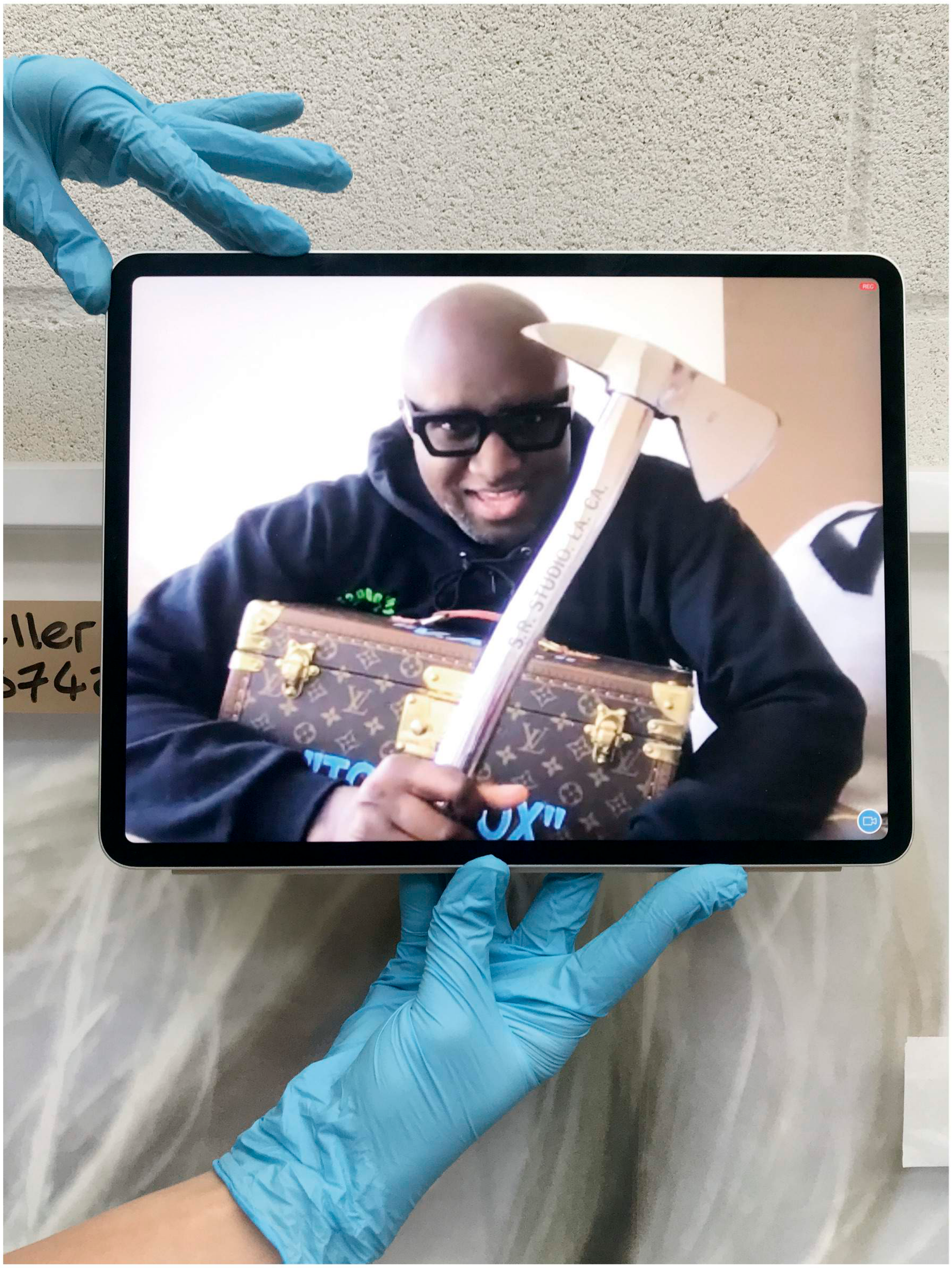
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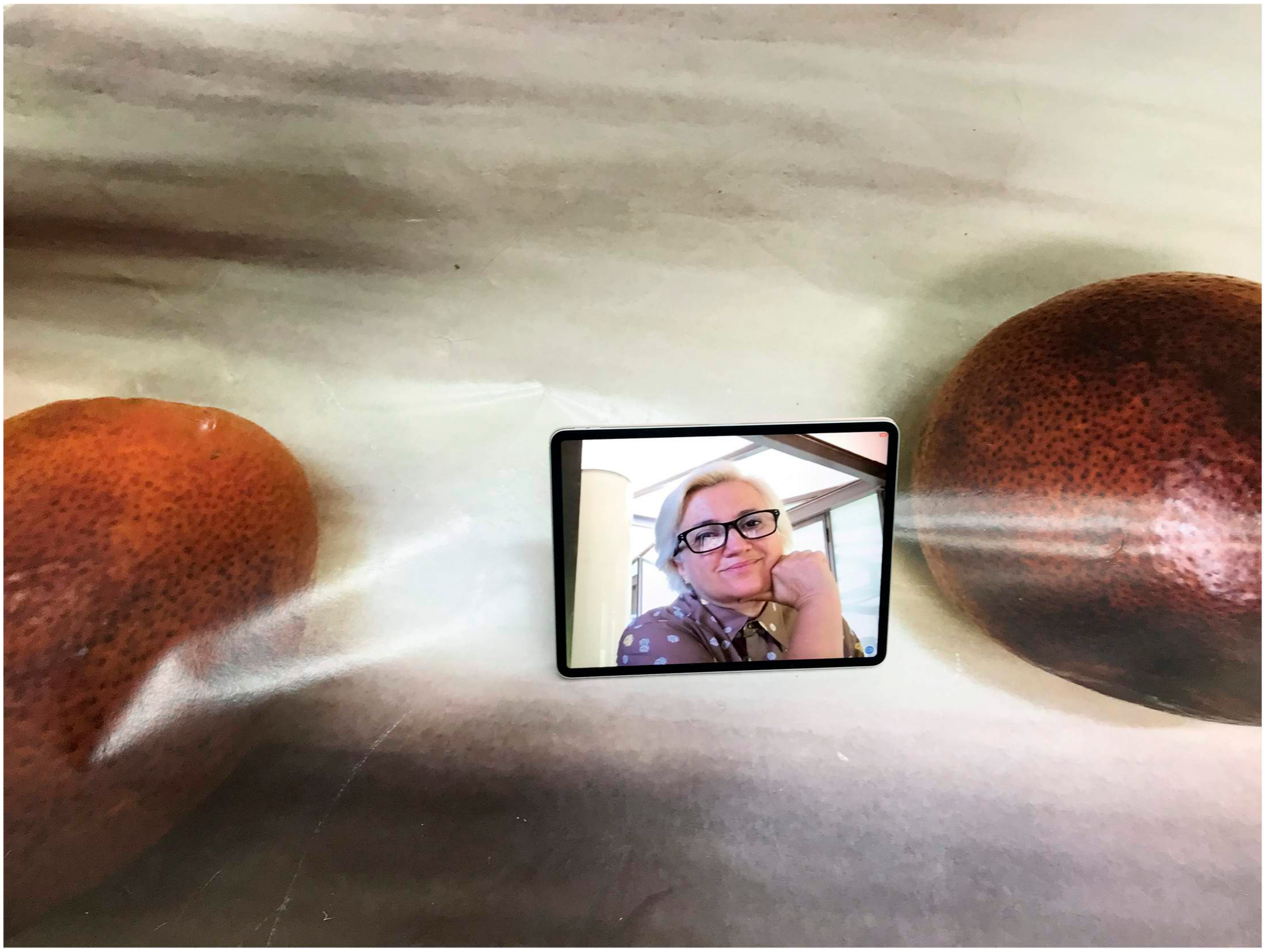

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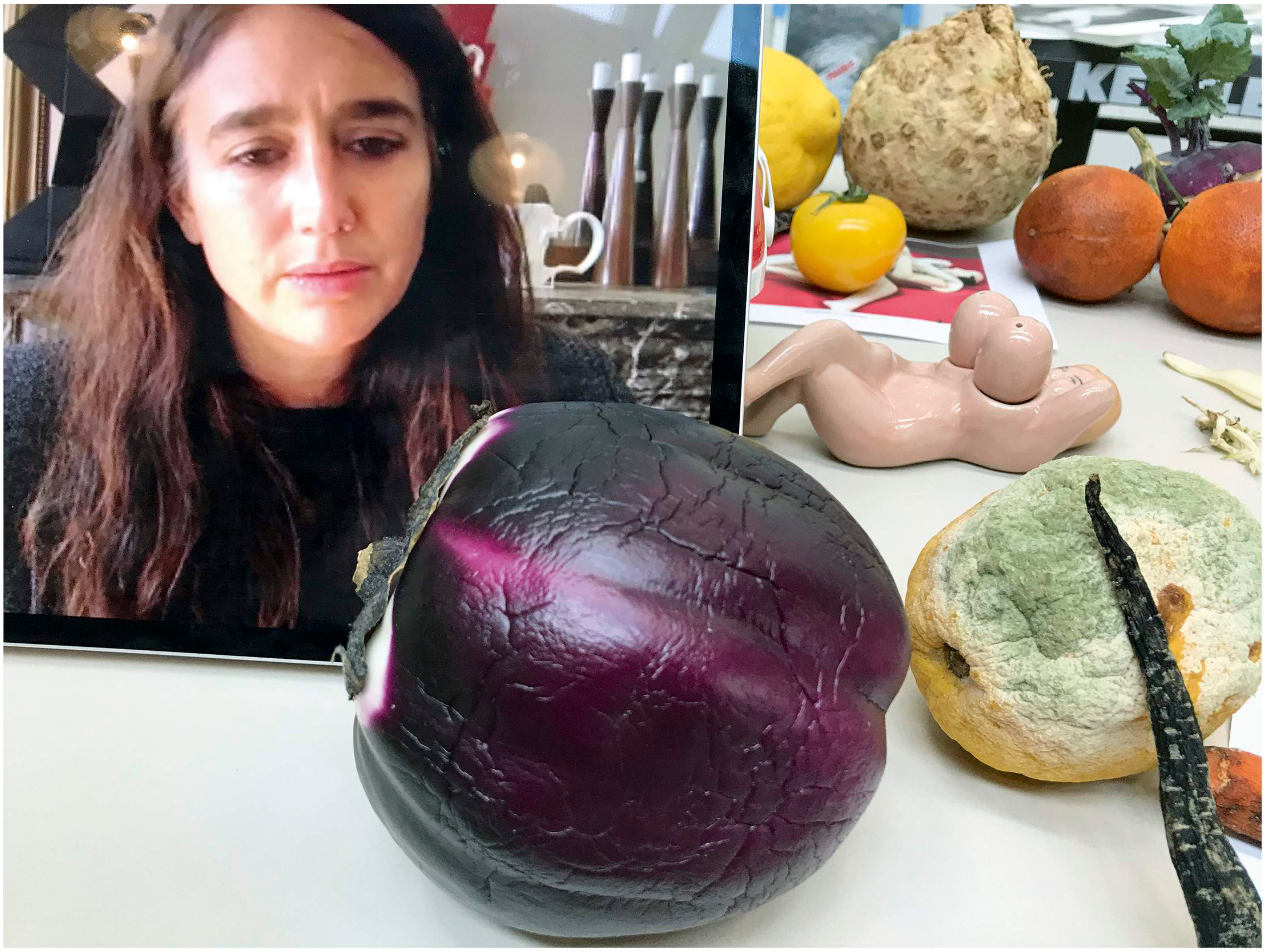

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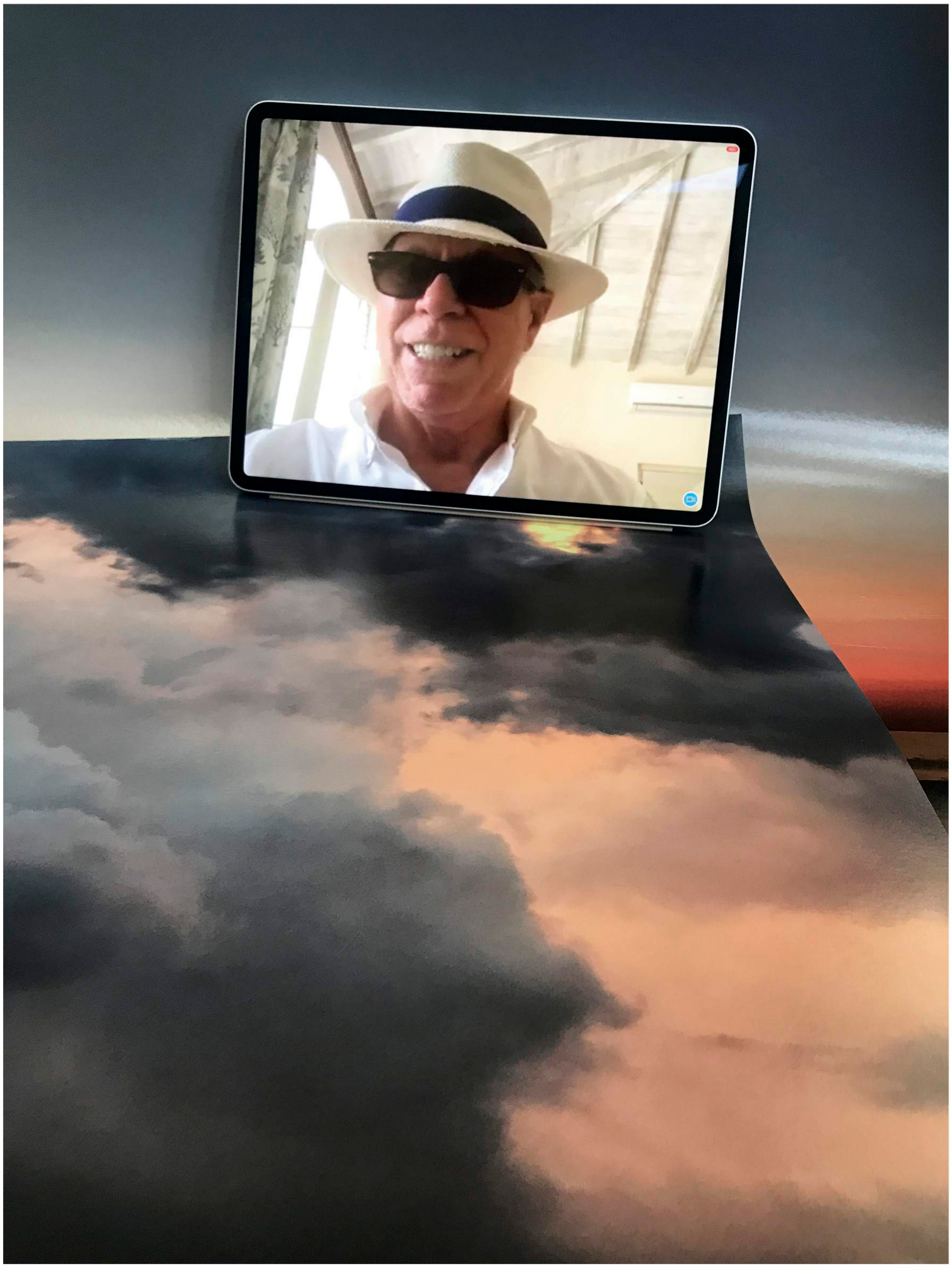

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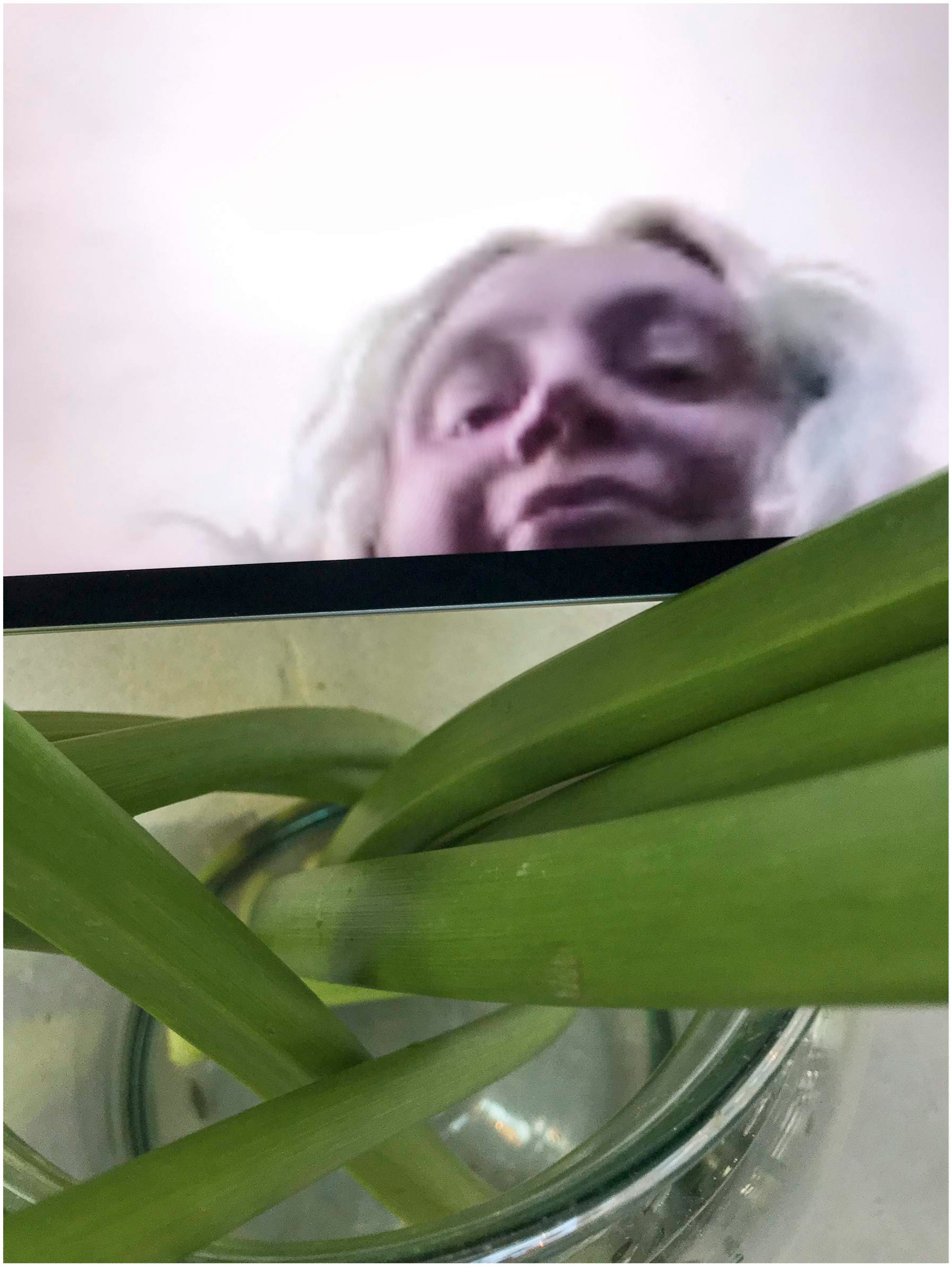

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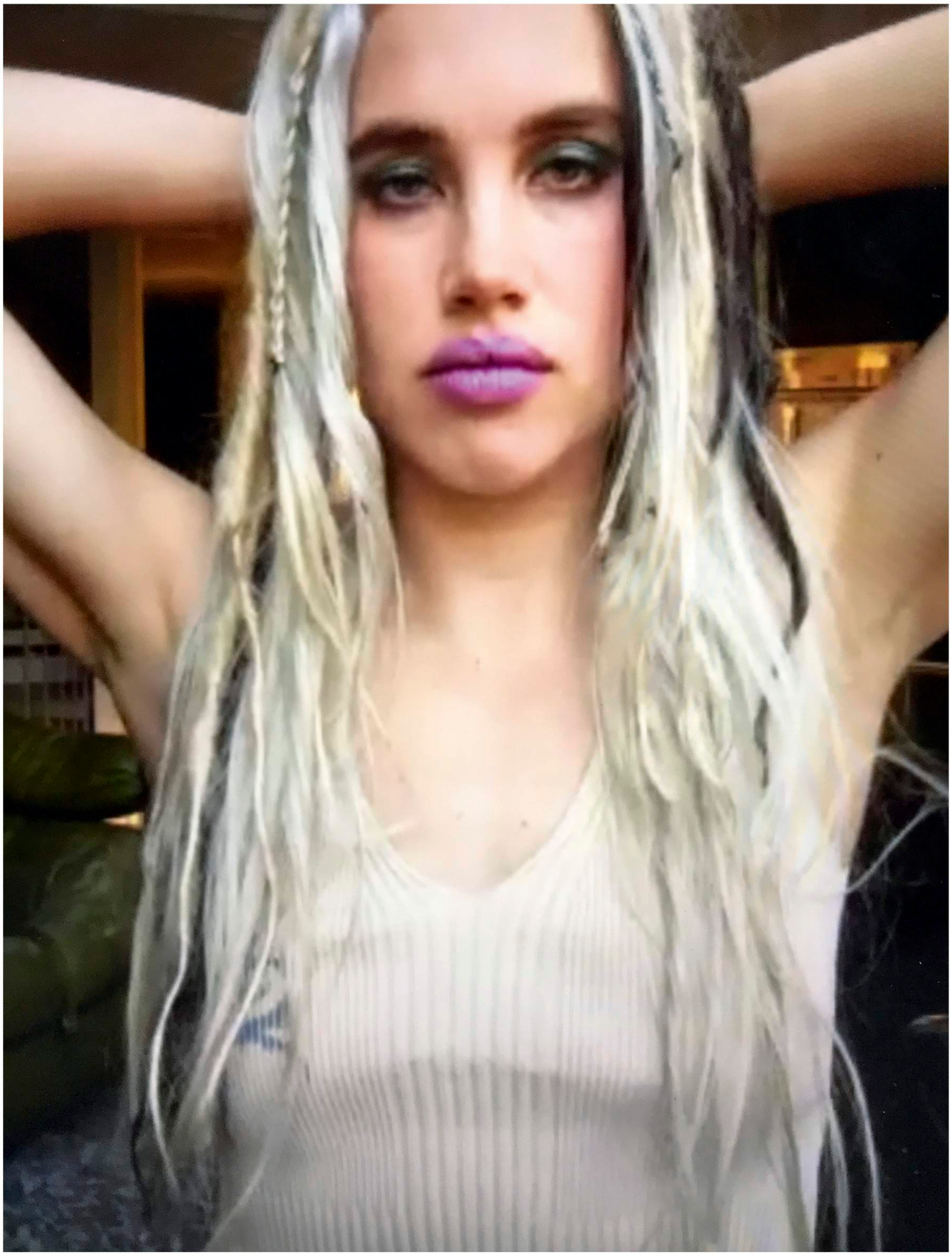

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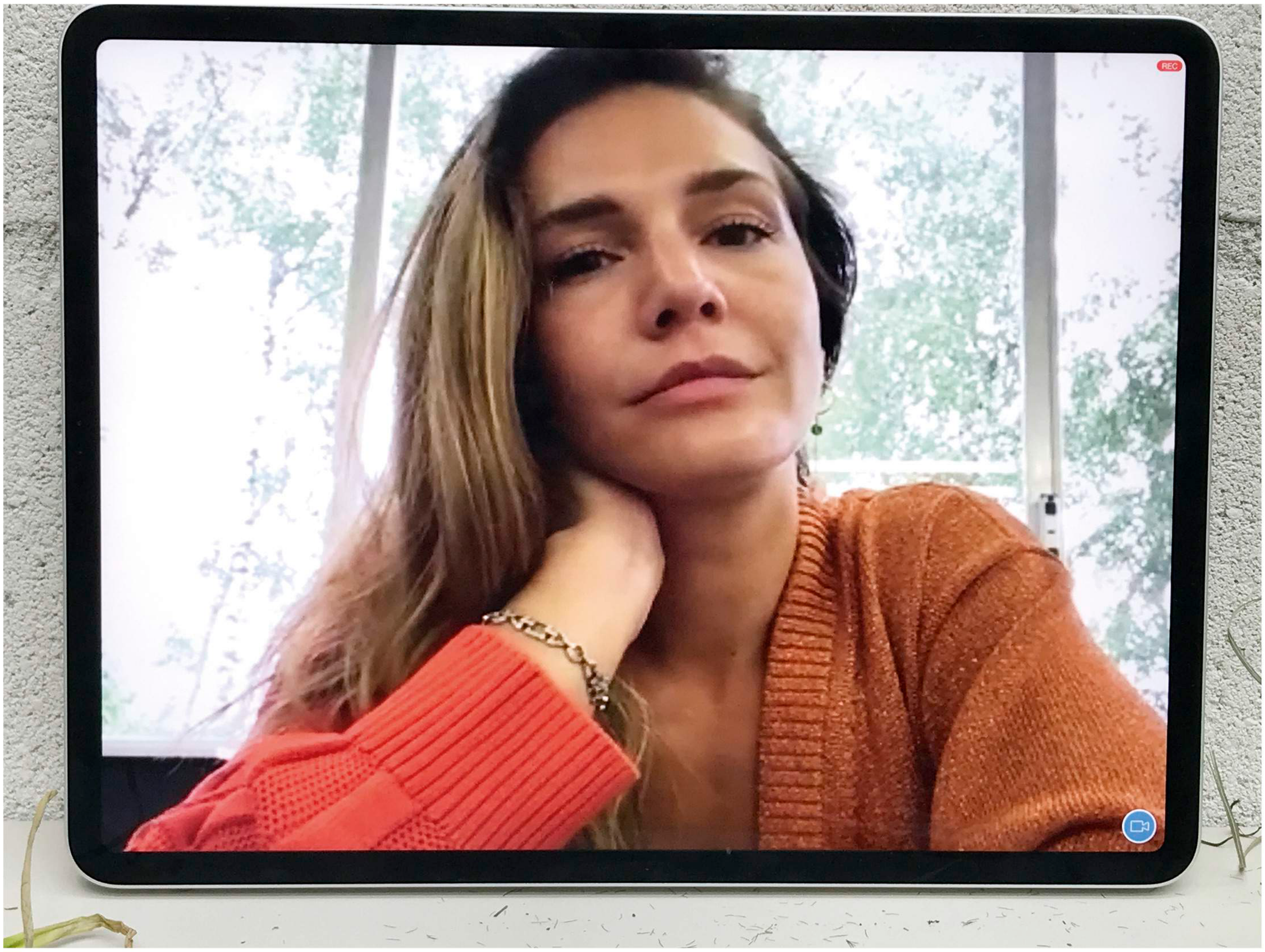

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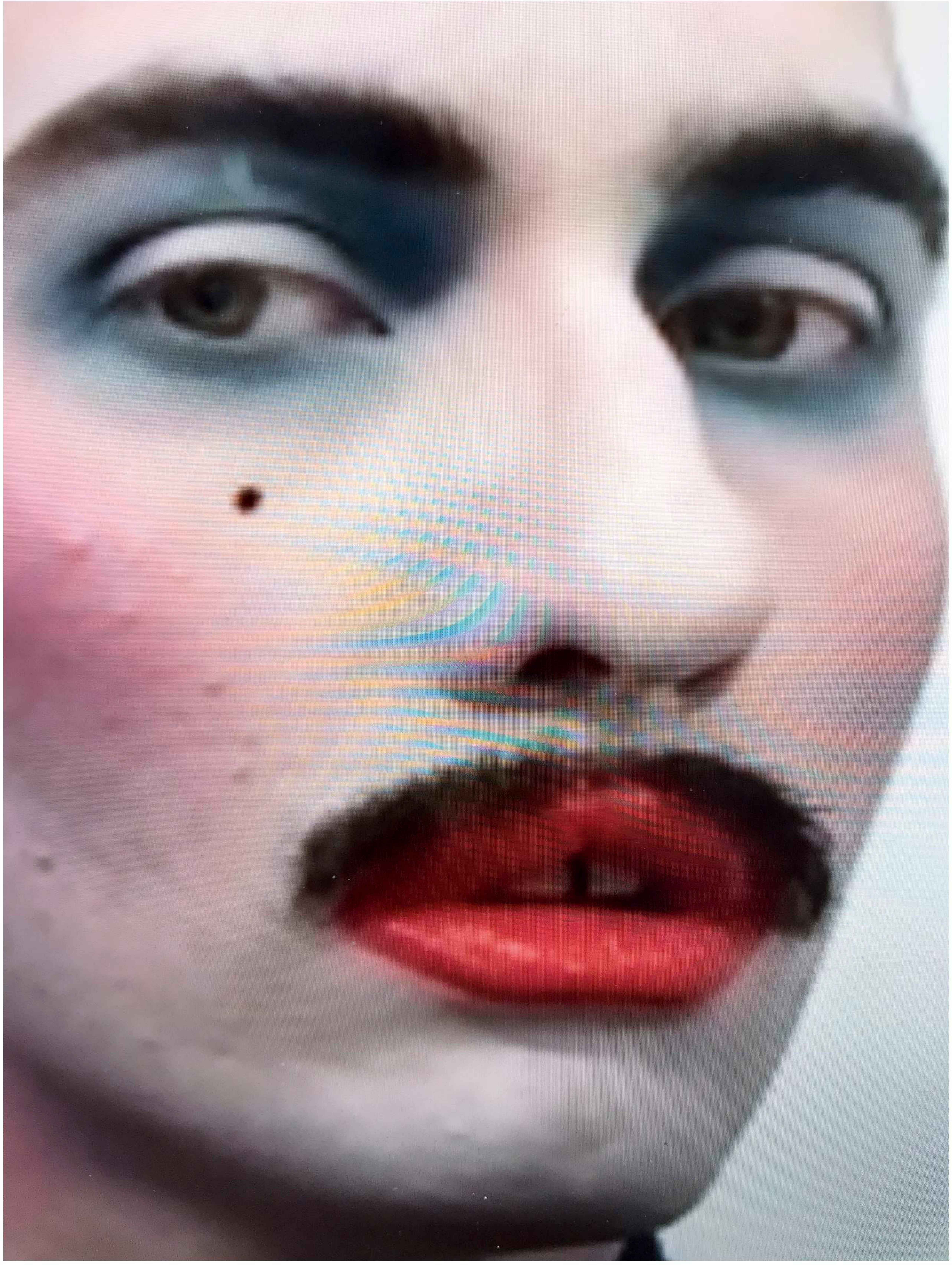

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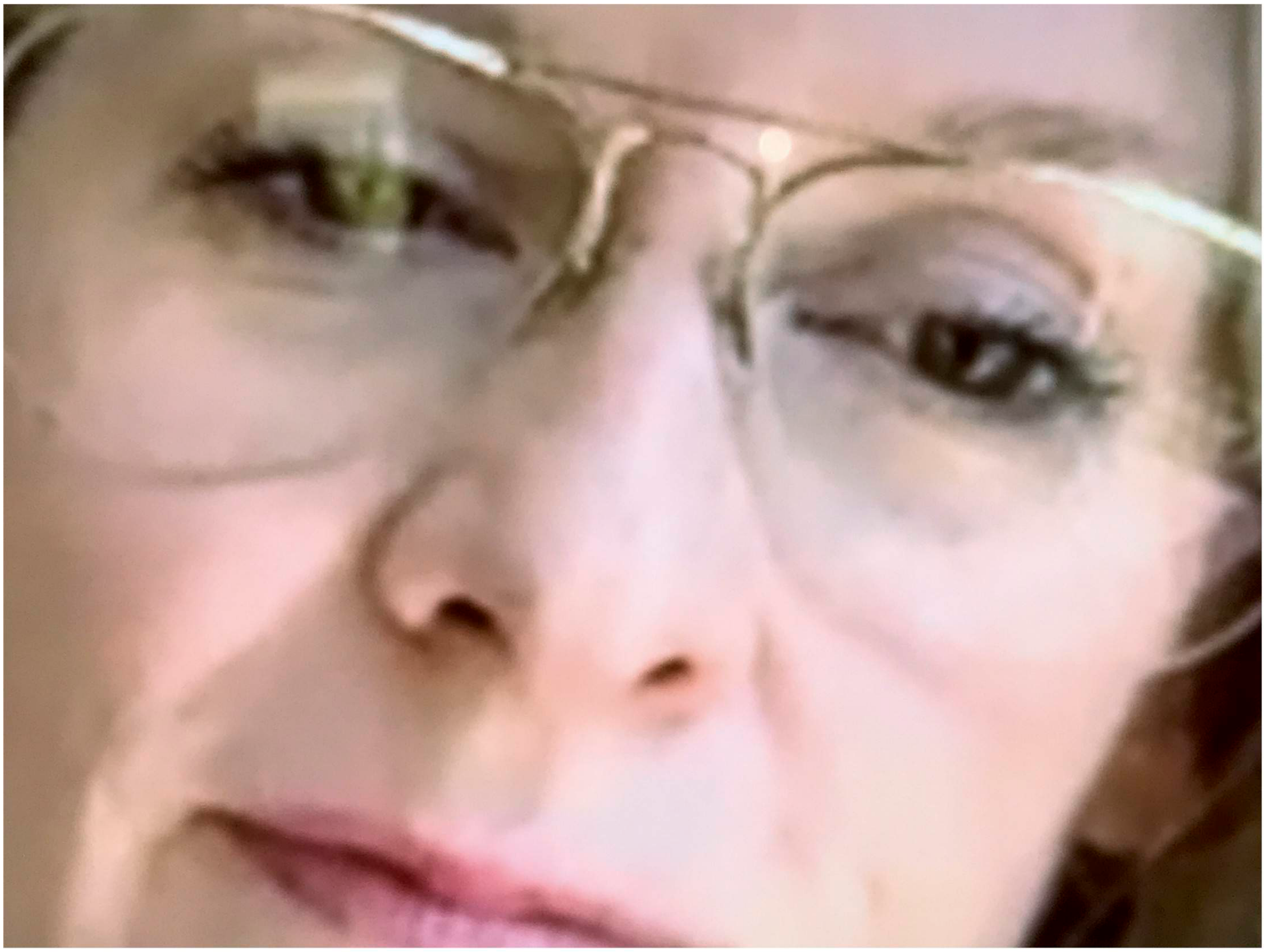

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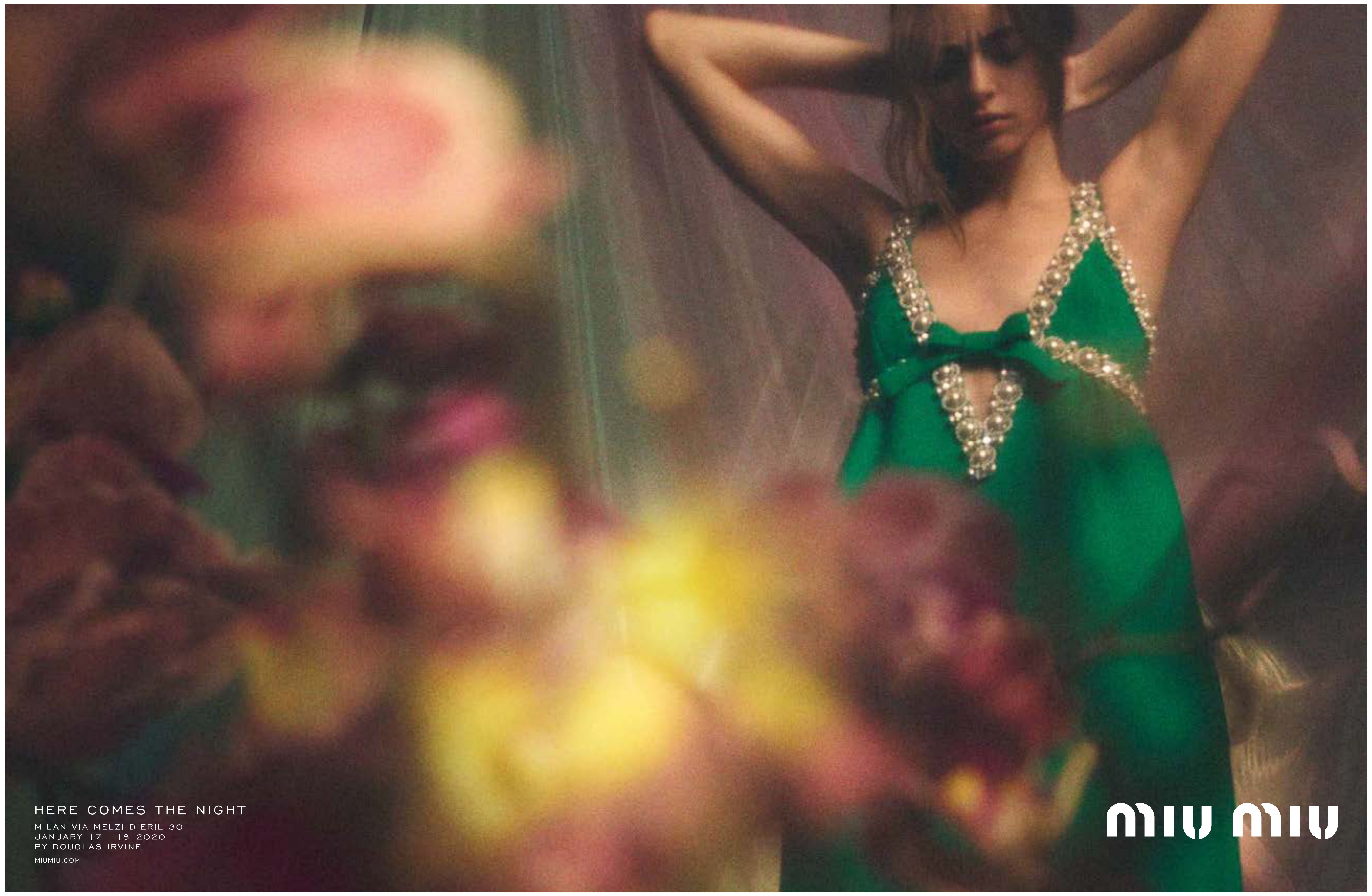
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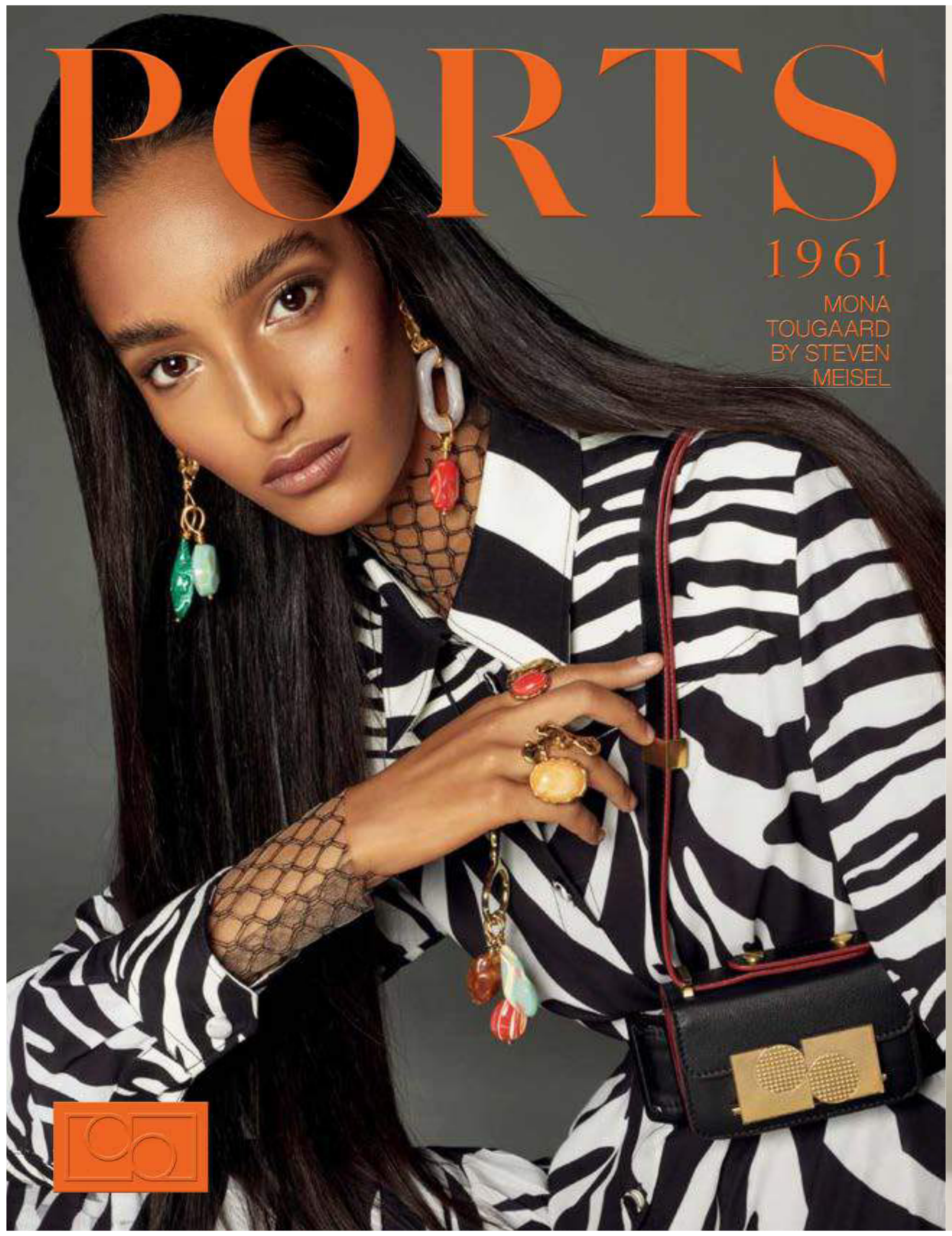
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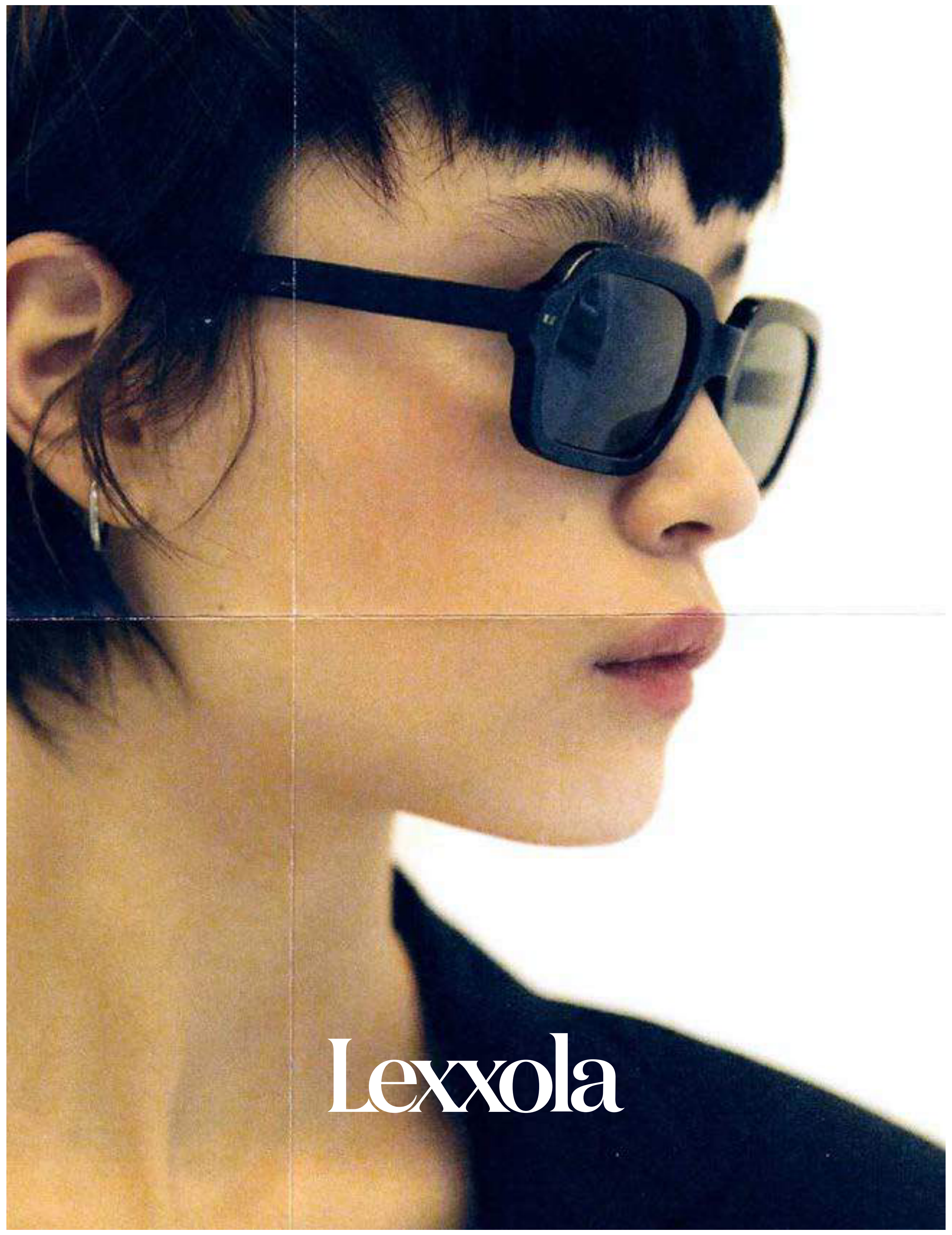

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“The Secret to French Hair“
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What do we talk about? What are we looking at?

The situation we've all been navigating of late has certainly thrown up some profound questions. The type that might trigger all manner of responses from a magazine such as *System*. We could have begun loftily deliberating over the future of fashion. Started issuing open letters. Offering solutions. Announcing calls to action. Or simply doing nothing at all. Pressing pause. Opting out. Awaiting a return to less turbulent times.

In the end, we decided to do what comes most naturally to a magazine that has always aimed to explore the people and the dialogues at the heart of fashion. We reached out to some people in the industry.

We asked a selection of fashion designers to chat with friends, heroes, colleagues, confidants, or each other – before inviting them all to dial in and be captured remotely by Juergen Teller's ever-playful eye.

And we asked the industry's art directors to deliver a fashion portfolio, using the limitations of the moment as a catalyst to explore and reveal what it is they do.

We are sincerely grateful to every single person who has had a hand in the following pages. This issue of *System* would be nothing without you.

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‘What do we talk about?’

Photographs by Juergen Teller
Creative partner, Dovile Drizyte

In early April, we sent the following request to a broad range of fashion designers.

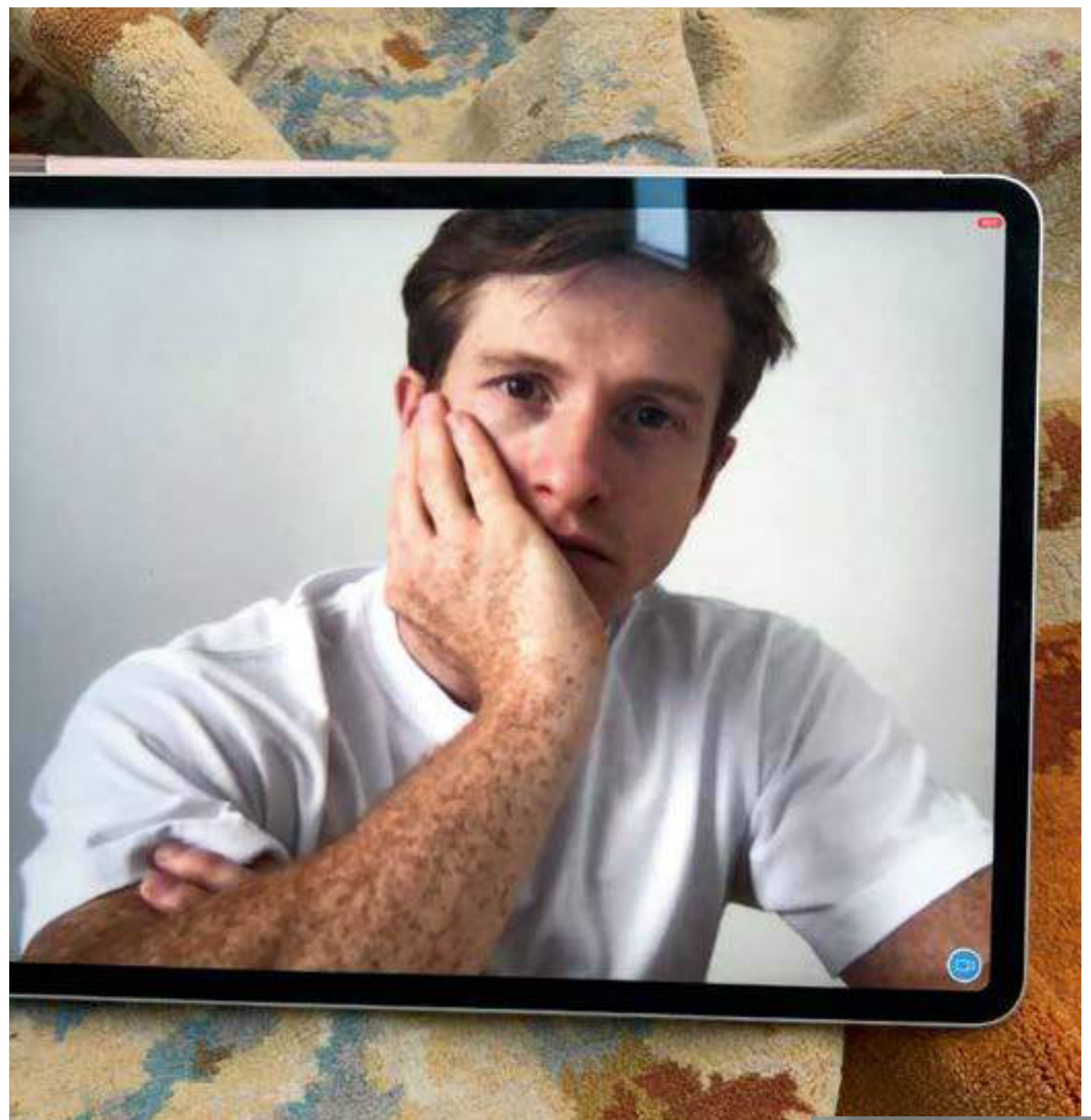
Given the current situation, we would like* System*'s next issue to focus on long-form interviews led by designers – conversations recorded via video conferencing.

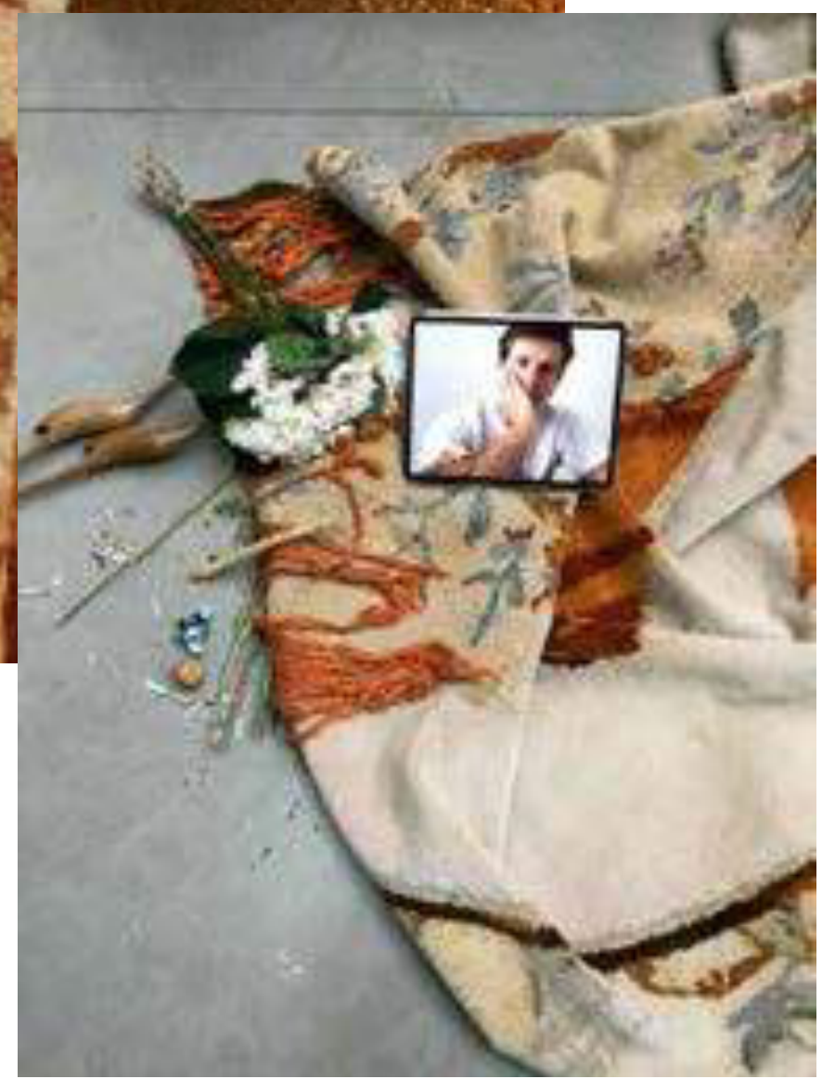
Now feels like a particularly relevant moment to focus on designers, as the industry looks to you to lead fashion towards the future, to capture the moment, and, perhaps above all, to enable us to dream.

What would you talk about? It's not for us to dictate this, because we feel the project could have an inherent Warholian quality – anything that you say becomes valid when placed in the time-capsule context of this document of the moment.

Many wrote back, saying they'd like to use the opportunity to connect with a friend, a colleague, a confidant, a hero, or another designer.

We're extremely grateful that they did. And the least we could do to return the gesture is give each their own *System* cover.





Virgil Abloh and Daniel Lee

Moderated by Jonathan Wingfield

‘You and I are polar opposites, but we are both balancing the ecosystem, right?’

Virgil Abloh and Daniel Lee
in conversation, 28 April 2020.
Moderated by Jonathan Wingfield.

Virgil Abloh: Daniel, how’s it going?

Daniel Lee: Good. I’m in Milan. I came back here a couple of weeks ago from London because we started to open things up a bit here. What about you, Virgil?

Virgil: At home in Chicago. I’m enjoying the slower pace.

Daniel: This must be the longest you’ve not been in an airplane in a while.

Virgil: [Laughs] For sure. Are your factories open yet?

Daniel: Some are opening slowly.

> **‘It’s like being back at university, working in your bedroom on your collection. It feels youthful, in an anti-corporate and back-to-basics kind of way.’**

Virgil: Same here, as of this and next week, things are starting to creep open, head offices are opening, which is a sign. I’m always an optimist, so I was looking at the upside of things and it is like, hey, you know, I just finished my last set of shows, so it has worked out to be a well-timed break.

Daniel: Same for me, because we don’t work very far in advance and I am definitely a last-minute kind of person. March, for us, is the quietest month of the year. We used to look at a three-month period for the next collection, so for us this has happened at a time that’s more-or-less manageable. But it is certainly strange staying in one place for so long; I haven’t done this since I was at university.

Jonathan Wingfield: What percentage of time are you both giving to working on fashion?

Daniel: It’s hard to say because I’ve never considered this a nine-to-five job. It’s so ingrained in what I do. Even a conversation with my friends could be related to fashion. It’s something I think about a huge percentage of the time and that hasn’t changed. I am trying to keep a sense of routine, though. Exercise is important, and my mind has definitely not stopped. I’m just not someone who tends to sit around.

Virgil: At the moment, sitting with a blank piece of paper and sketching to symphony music feels ideal, like, ‘Oh, we have all this time off and I can sit and just dream up ideas.’

Daniel: That’s the ideal, right? In our kind of companies, we really are creative led. I started at Bottega, not even two years ago and in that time the creatives and the designers have really advanced, but what has been great about this situation has been having the time to consider other elements of the business: the architecture, merchandising and marketing departments, and then really working together with those people. I don’t know how you feel, but there are certain elements of the job – communications is one – that feel entirely possible to do from distance. Whereas design can be a bit more challenging.

Virgil: Another thing I’m trying to do is keep the camaraderie and the excitement up. For my design teams, for example, their lifestyles have been turned upside down and even though we’re not making collections and the factories are closed, I have been trying to keep the creative spark alive. It has been more conversational; we’ve been reflecting on how the world has been affected by the situation. That’s the inspiration for the design of future collections, rather than picking up fabrics and draping them – stuff we can’t actually do right now. Our segment of the fashion ecosystem, especially, we are the younger end of the group, so we have to translate this whole mood shift into runway shows, campaigns and marketing meetings.

Daniel: I often talk about enjoying the physical act of designing, of being in a room full of people and the stimulus that comes from those conversations. They are an emotional process; they’re like a chain reaction, and I certainly miss that.

Virgil: I agree. I just had a call with my team this morning about marketing the collection. That team is detached from my studio and they are asking, ‘When are we going to get a chance to start planning again?’ and I’m like, ‘We haven’t had a chance to make the magic yet.’ It’s what you’re saying Daniel, we’ve lost that kind of ‘coincidence’, someone making something and you seeing it and saying, ‘Oh, what if we did that?’ That’s what has been lost by working as satellites: actually sitting in a room and someone suggesting something – that is where the magic comes from. I have been creating, but without the magic of coincidence.

Daniel: So much comes from happy accidents; they lead to so many things you never thought would happen. You always start a collection with an intention, but it is all about good instinct. It’s a journey that you cannot predict.

Jonathan: As we gradually emerge from this period and resume normal practices, do you think your impulse will be to dive into escapism and fantasy or will you want to double-down on realism and document what is going on?

Virgil: That is probably the most important question of our jobs today. I often bring up how the grocery stores just seemingly shifted. I was a vain shopper: super healthy and conscious, juicing, eating only organic, going to Whole Foods, which is a big thing in America. We looked at shopping as an extension of fashion in a way, but now these places have become depots, more utilitarian than purely lifestyle or even desirable. Sitting at home I’m trying to think about how fashion works for the consumer right now. The person buying a garment will probably be wearing the same clothes for a number of days; they don’t have a restaurant or a nightclub to go to; they don’t have an *event* to dress for. So I am more trying to dial into that reality. It’s obviously a socially conscious environment now, and people are way more thoughtful. So if I am going to do a new proposition for clothing, if I am going to add a new shoe, handbag or jacket, right now I’m thinking, does that even need to exist?

> **‘How does fashion work for the consumer now? People buying garments don’t have a restaurant or nightclub to go to; no events to dress for.’**

Daniel: I just want to continue in the same way we have for the past two years at Bottega; it’s not the time to change direction. I think a lot about the role of fashion and it comes back to this idea of dreams and bringing joy. Creativity really does have its place: reading books, watching films. In a moment like this, we lean on creativity for some direction.

Jonathan: Should the next collections you guys do, and the accompanying imagery you will be overseeing, have a palpable sense of what has been going on? How might this impact what a collection will look like in the future?

Daniel: I don’t feel that I am a particularly political designer. I’m not outwardly talking about environmental issues, but it is a responsibility that we have and there has to be an acknowledgment of what the world is going through. I realize that my reality isn’t the same for everyone. My sister works in a hospital emergency room and they have all had the virus. We have to acknowledge that as an industry we need to be more mindful and more responsible.

Virgil: I agree. Our role collectively is to record the times and we naturally do that with the the clothes and runway shows and that is what makes us excel at our position. People are adopting a new stance that they didn’t have before, which I think is smart. We have to be thoughtful and true to whichever house we are in and show how that can bend to address the here and now. I don’t think in absolutes; it is always better to compromise and to sit 50-50 between the mood of the times and the body of work that we’ve been creating since we didn’t know we were making fashion. That makes it an honest approach.

Jonathan: As creative directors of houses with significant resources and staff, do you feel a sense of responsibility towards those people, to keep them in some way engaged with the whole process of generating ideas and the magic coming out of the houses you work for?

Daniel: Absolutely. There are many people who moved to Milan for Bottega and for me, and I am very conscious of that. We speak a few times a week to make sure everyone is OK and feeling good, and certainly our role is to inspire and to lead these people through these times.

Virgil: I’ve been trying to make the studio atmosphere like a feeling of euphoria or escape. I’ve been telling my studio to revisit the times when they were in college, when they were working on their thesis or their final collections. As a consequence, there are books all over their places that they don’t normally have time to dive into; there are films and workout routines. This is the closest thing to a working vacation we’re going to get and I am trying to pull the youthful side out of them, from before they got to where they are now. My teams work on the collections so quickly that I never get to know where they come from. So, it is trying to look at the upside.

Daniel: I completely agree; it’s almost like being back at university and working in your bedroom on your final collection. Especially at the beginning of this season, it has felt like a return to real ideas, to experimentation. It feels youthful, in an anti-corporate and back-to-basics kind of way. It reminds me of the 1990s.

Virgil: And that is where you will find this renaissance. I have always felt that you should put fashion in the hands of younger people. The older generation of designers who have been doing it, all the great names, they’ve had a firm grasp on the profession for 30 years. Now we are seeing creative directors who are in their first five years at a house or brand. We've all begged for newness or new voices. People are now considering things like, what is a design studio today? How are they run? How do the communications speak? What are we making in these little studios with our teams? And this time is allowing us to hone what we want to say.

Jonathan: To what extent do you experience a sense of the gilded cage? Bottega Veneta and even more so Louis Vuitton are these huge companies, with incredible headquarters, and the wealth and power those places represent. Does no longer physically going into those places allow for more free-form or even anarchic ways to think about what you are doing?

> **'At my job interviews for Louis Vuitton, I questioned that antiquated idea of luxury standing for elitism, that whole 'I own this, do you own that?' scenario.'**

Daniel: I tend to spend more time in London, because when I am in Milan I can feel the weight of the house. We normally work in a rented photographic studio in London, a very simple warehouse, so it's a return to basics, to those 'university' moments, which I always find very fruitful and freeing.

Virgil: Anarchy is the word! Like a very chic anarchy that pays respect to the forefathers and the corporateness, that is the job of the young – to overthrow or make a point. I am always trying to provide an alternative solution that is better and more modern. That is often how my meetings start. Thinking of the briefs I get from anyone in marketing, anyone who is not at the restaurant or the café or the nightclubs, breathing the air, it is their job to get what *they* want, so I am trying to find some happy medium and present ideas that we can all be proud of.

Daniel: Bottega is much smaller than Vuitton. What was interesting about Bottega at the beginning, and why I was so attracted to this project, was that this is a house with an incredible leather-goods heritage, but the ready-to-wear infrastructure only came more recently. So the whole process has been quite liberating, which has been very helpful. We are discovering as we go along.

Virgil: What I love about Bottega – and I have always loved the brand – is that in America it is seen as unique. There was a small shop in Chicago that my mother-in-law would shop in and I loved that it was so luxurious, without the usual noise of the big houses.

Daniel: That was precisely the point. What I love so much about the brand is that it resonates with the person, what we do is very much for *you* and it's not for anyone else; it's for *your* interaction, *your* experience with a bag, coat or garment. What I love about luxury is this idea of craftsmanship, quality and, even though I hate the word, 'timelessness', that's relevant here. Bottega is all of those things and at the same time, it is very different to everything else on the market. What we are moving towards feels authentically Bottega; we are not trying to reinvent ourselves. After this time of quarantine, I feel even more affirmed in what we are doing.

Virgil: Same for me, it is about cherishing true luxury, but thinking about what that actually means now. During my job interviews for Louis Vuitton, I questioned that antiquated idea of luxury standing for elitism or cocktail parties, that whole 'I own this and do you own that?' scenario. My generation simply loves the value of a beautiful shoe or handbag in their closet. In my mind, something that you cherish or covet is now luxury. I don't think it's so much about preaching from mountain tops about how expensive or rare a thing is – that is such an old idea.

Daniel: Also, Virgil, the reality of luxury is that it means *so* many different things today. And what's interesting is that all these different aspects of luxury can coexist. There is no predefined way anymore. I think we went through the errors of different peaks and troughs. Like the new expression of luxury, but I think each creative director now has their own point of view about that.

Virgil: I want fashion journalism to level up to where the creative designers and the consumers have already risen. I hope that nuance is getting picked up on, between all of our collections. It is not the obvious; it is more the sub-context.

Daniel: As an industry that really prides itself on inclusivity and sustainability, we are really dealing with those issues more and more. That includes the idea of more kindness and compassion towards designers. I'm not sure if journalists appreciate how much of ourselves and our personality we put into those collections. It is such a heartfelt experience; we really expose ourselves season after season.

Virgil: Right now everyone is having a 'What is going to happen to fashion?' moment. It's obviously the topic of the week, and more often than not people are looking for a practical answer, like when are the shows going to start again; what about consumption; what about sustainability? But I feel like everyone is always griping about the industry: 'I always hated that' or 'The sales mark is down'. While I think the number-one thing that we can do as an industry is change how we *represent* what we do, how we talk about our work, and how that relates to the person in the street who can or cannot afford the items we're involved in, or who doesn't understand what our industry means. It is the easiest change that could be made.

Daniel: I go back and forth in my mind. How much should we designers support each other? How much is healthy competition actually relevant any more? Is that what ultimately drives us all to do better and to strive for more? It's all a fine line, I guess.

> **'Virgil has challenged the idea of what a fashion designer is today. His triumph has been the construction of a community around the collections.'**

Jonathan: One of the principal ideas behind this project is to invite designers to speak with one another. For so long it was considered almost taboo for a designer to even acknowledge that there were other designers at 'competing' houses or groups, even though designers clearly have so much in common. Ultimately, you are the people driving the future, not the accountants, the marketing people, the suits. Isn't that the designers' 'responsibility'?

Daniel: It is the creatives who will change the system. What I think Virgil has done so well at Louis Vuitton is challenge the idea of what a fashion designer is today. One of his triumphs has been the construction of a community around the collections; it's about more than just the collections now. You've given a platform to a generation of younger creatives who really wouldn't have had a voice – and there is something super important about that.

Virgil: That simply came from the idea: 'I am going into an industry whose pillars I know really well. And I know that if I mimic the pillars to make something distinct, then that is not valuable. It's not me, it's not my story, it's not where I come from.' I realized that the context around fashion – around the clothes and the collection – needed a new vantage point. I was like, 'How can I make this inclusive, make it for real, but also an homage to the craftsmanship and the lineage before me?' That is what interests me so much in the profession.

Daniel: I totally agree.

Virgil: I'd say the whole point of us coming together and having this conversation is that it was *definitely* taboo in the previous eras. I mean, do designers even talk to each other? Is it so competitive that designers can even end up talking shit about each other? If we really value our industry, and we want it to fulfil a marketing term like inclusiveness, then is wanting to mimic our government and making everything political really the right way to go? Like what you said Daniel, I don't consider myself a political designer; I think that art and creativity sit above politics, and it is our job to distract away from those things. I mean, in politics if you say something, the other person doesn't even listen; they just *react*.

Jonathan: You're saying fashion's appeal should transcend politics or indeed, the political beliefs of the wearer?

Virgil: Yes. What I love about fashion is that Daniel and I create things that exude beauty. A woman buying one of your handbags or a guy buying suits from me, those people could have polar-opposite political opinions, but they see the beauty in what we do. It's entirely democratic. And that metaphor can be distilled down to how designers in our industry relate to one another. The old way of fashion was just, 'Act like they don't exist!' or even worse, 'We are in this vacuum called fashion'. That is the number-one outdated premise. I keep harping on about journalism, but it's everyone in the industry. It's not just designers; it's also in our businesses; it's in the marketing. In fact, the further away you get from the actual design studio, the more opportunity competitiveness has to become detrimental to understanding the overall ecosystem.

Daniel: It is a time for frank conversations around the future. The role of creative director is so unique and wonderful and challenging and produces so many emotions at the same time; I certainly feel that my conversations with other creative directors have been helpful. They've been able to give me advice and insight that I don't think anyone else could have done.

Jonathan: Daniel, you're talking about a sense of frankness that this moment is allowing, how about asking Virgil a frank question?

Daniel: Oh, my God. [Pause] OK, do you still think we even need to do fashion shows? That is what I am really thinking about.

Virgil: I think that shows are actually more valuable to real people than they are to the industry people sitting on our front rows. It's a shame that all that creativity and budget is going towards people who, as soon as the show music starts, sit with their pen out, waiting either to be impressed or not, and then they go to dinner and talk shit. Whereas the girl in Essex or in the middle of America is really excited by the shoes and the bag that you make, and can't wait to save up and own it. I think it is a shame that, more often than not, the show is for the dissenting eye of the previous generation.

Daniel: I totally agree that there is that shift around the audience; a lot of the love I feel at Bottega is not necessarily from the people who attend the shows. It is on social media, it is in the stores, and I think that the real people and the real audience that we want to entertain, we need to think about how to reach them better.

> **'Daniel's Bottega is beautiful product. It relies neither on a logo nor the influential customer wearing it and talking about how great it is.'**

Virgil: The work that you are doing at Bottega has astounding resonance – from the design studio to the consumer. It's truly about craftsmanship and luxury and creating an identity with the shoes that stormed the world and the bags. What you're doing reminds me of the glory days when I would walk past a luxury store and see a product that spoke for itself. It's a product that is neither reliant on the logo, nor needs the influential customer wearing it and talking about how great it is.

Jonathan: It's interesting to consider this notion of 'post-logo', this return to the pure desirability that Daniel elicits by creating beautiful products for Bottega. What is the relevance right now of this all-important symbol that is the logo? Do you think that the next era in fashion might signify a return to quality product more than the logo or is that just unrealistic?

Daniel: Personally, I don't even think about the logo. I don't wear logos, so that has never been part of my life. For me, instinctively, I guess I just gravitate towards logo-less product. When I began at Bottega, the intention was to make product that was valid to put out into the world. I believe in my soul that if you put that much love and care into products then someone else will also appreciate it.

Virgil: For me, it's a bit different. There is no absolute; it's another 50-50 scenario. Louis Vuitton is huge, so if I make a cashmere sweater without a logo on it and then I make one with a logo, the scale of the economics is insanely different, so that is the nature of where I am. I mean, I have made a profession out of making a logo more interesting, but more often than not, I am actually trying to make product that *doesn't* rely on that or is a bit more interesting than just the logo. That proves to be a fun challenge. I don't run away from that, but there is nothing that feels like purer beauty than just appreciating an object for what it is, not because it signifies what brand it comes from.

Daniel: Today's successful creative directors take into account the heritage of their house; they understand if the house needs a logo, and if it doesn't, it doesn't. When you go against the grain of the heritage, and you don't respect that, I think that is very transparent. I feel like the real reason we have had success at Bottega is that we have been so rooted in the craftsmanship, the heritage. That really was the root of all the key products and it has real meaning.

Virgil: Exactly. You and I are polar opposites, in a way, but we are both balancing the ecosystem, right? If you look at us on opposite sides, it's two different styles of design. The point is that we appreciate each other, and we are providing solutions in fashion that are both logo-less and logo-driven. It is not about competitiveness or which customer you speak to, or that old idea of 'you're either Bottega or you are Off-White or you are Louis Vuitton'. You're not – and those things don't make sense any more. Why isn't fashion journalism following the logic of the customer? That kind of customer you find on social media who has one of your Bottega bags and pair of the Nike sneakers I've done, and they Instagram a perfect photo in their bedroom, where the product looks beautiful and really speaks. What would happen if the industry started celebrating the mingling and merging of products that resonate together? Look at the fashion-week schedules: it's like 30 designers in every city, and we each get one hour of everyone's time. Take all 90 of us designers and we are providing clothes for the top end of the whole world, even before you get to diffusion like H&M and Zara – so we're like a collective. There's only 90 of us on earth and there are billions of people. It's the same for the editors, there's only 80 of you guys. So between all of us, we are a lot more collective, but that fashion schedule says, 'You work for *System*, you work for *Vogue*, you work for Bottega, I work for Louis Vuitton, so we don't speak, we don't mingle, we look out of the side of our eyes to know what is happening.' Why can't we think of our industry as an industry for dreaming, like the film industry does, or like the art world does sometimes? Like a collective of artists in a position to transcend categories and be as diverse as we want it to be.

> **'If I make a cashmere sweater without a Louis Vuitton logo on it and then I make one with a logo, the scale of the economics is *insanely* different.'**

Jonathan: Some smaller brands will inevitably cease to exist because of the effects Covid-19 will have on the economy and consumerism. There is going to be a shift in the fashion industry's ecosystem: 'less' might replace 'too much'. How does that make you both feel?

Daniel: There is inevitably going to be a domination of bigger brands. Sadly, we live in a time where it is easier to exist as a bigger brand. Something I feel on a very personal level is the idea of London: I was trained there and I continue to see London as this incubator of design talent. Many of the guys I work with in the studios in Paris were trained in London. One thing we are working on right now is using our resources – the production company, the communications, the Bottega expertise – to partner with Central Saint Martins to create a platform will allow this year's graduates of the BA fashion programme to present their work. This kind of initiative is great: the bigger brands, which have more access to technology and innovation, partnering with younger design talent to provide them with a platform to show their work.

Virgil: It has to be like that. Like you said, brands will close, I agree, and I am also saddened. Our industry is so excessive: the collections are huge, and when you go to Selfridges, the floor has 300 designers and everyone is trying to vie for your attention. So, just like a natural ecosystem, what's happening now might be a way to minimalize things and let the best rise to the top. We all love amazing things, but look at it pragmatically: it is harder to have amazing things when there are 300 options. My advice to younger designers, whose brands might be closing and for whom bankruptcy is a real issue, is to look at the upside and see what you can do to work at a house or see what you can do to partner with another brand, and start something new. Bankruptcy is not a bad word, shutting down a business is detrimental, sure, but what I've learned from my own career is that the sooner you put your first idea and your first business in the trash, the sooner you begin your real career. As soon as I let that first thing go, I realized that it is not the end of the world, it is only the beginning.

Daniel: Real creativity will find a way. Certainly, both of us are very determined and this wouldn't have deterred me; I would have still found a way. As you are saying, maybe it is time for a smaller market. Maybe it's the time to offer some of these great creatives who have been working on smaller brands and businesses the opportunities to work in larger brands' design studios. That maybe isn't a bad thing.

Virgil: This is how the world worked before fashion; it's how every civilization, every movement within art, every genre within anything you can think of, there is always a younger generation that goes for the neck.

Jonathan: One part of the fashion industry most affected by the current situation has been the photo shoot, because it's an innately collaborative process. As we emerge from this period, will people take some elements of this imposed isolation and these restrictions and reconsider what the collaborative campaign production process could be? Or do you think that everyone is just dying to get back to what that process was like six months ago?

Virgil: Again, with my half-half, 50-50 hat on, I am sitting looking at all these Zoom photo shoots and the lo-fi-ness and loving how modern it is. Like when I shoot with Juergen Teller and he uses his iPhone, I think, 'Wow, everything else is about using big production sets, whereas he can create an image that is pure and authentic, and doesn't feel like it is highly produced.' I think beauty is something that transcends every up and down of every civilizational change. The beauty and message need to be detached from the aesthetic and the status quo, and I think that this line in the sand will give us the chance to reanalyse that.

Jonathan: What's the flip side of the coin for you though?

Virgil: I am not a fan of things becoming lower quality just because of circumstances. One thing I am afraid of is that all the brands are going to start presenting themselves like they are the Red Cross. All of a sudden, these commercial things are now trying to be heartfelt. I see it on TV commercials, like for cars saying they'll extend your payments to later. I'm very averse to things becoming marketing exercises, when they are not soaked in what the brand really stands for.

Jonathan: You're talking about commerce masquerading as altruism.

Virgil: Exactly, and that scares me because while I feel it is a responsible thing to do, I also feel like there is going to be a lot of noise inspired by that same impetus, which is to communicate to the customer that you feel XYZ. That is something the big brands don't do so well because they're so big, while independent brands do really well because they don't have shareholders. So perhaps that will open the door for young independent brands to surge ahead in this moment. And it's down to people like Daniel and I to keep our businesses on course.

'If we want to fulfil a marketing term like inclusiveness, then is mimicking our government and making everything political the right way to go?'

Daniel: I am really attached to the level of execution that we are working at now. The quality of the image, the consideration, all that preparation and process – it's huge to arrive at one picture that lives alone in the street. So much work goes into that and we cannot let go of that. We also have to remember: we are leading huge luxury houses – and there is a certain level of execution that goes hand in hand with that. When you are one of the most expensive brands on the market, there is a level of expectation. I think we should all be more responsible; we should look deep within ourselves in terms of humanitarianism. That kind of behaviour should be at the core of everything we do, not something to be used as a marketing exercise; it should be a given.

Virgil: Louis Vuitton is one of the biggest brands, so we have a tremendous responsibility to keep the top-end healthy. If we decide not to do a show, that means there is a young design student who won't do a show because editors won't go to Paris or Milan. If we all of a sudden take a back seat, there won't be the same vibrancy in the market. We have a large market share, so we should be able to ride out the storm and use creativity to bring out the overarching ecosystem, and let it chime. To me, that's a big important aspect of what we are doing.

Jonathan: While we are in a reflective mood, I wanted to ask you about professional disappointments. I have been watching sports documentaries recently and elite sports stars all seem to have experienced disappointment at some point in their career, like poor results or injury – but the true champions are the ones who are able to learn from that and come back stronger. Thinking about fashion, it is less clear if there are moments of disappointment in a designer's career. Could you both describe such a moment in your careers, where something happened, but you grew from it to come back stronger?

Virgil: That is a good, but hard question. Essentially we are taking about the ups and downs and the journey to get to where we are now. When I think about that, it's not so much the moment in the public eye. My career has been slow and steady. It started from one printed T-shirt and now I do 12 collections a year, between men's and women's, Off White and Louis Vuitton. The most significant moment in my career was sitting in front of the top management at Louis Vuitton, and saying, 'Hey, if you give me the opportunity at Louis Vuitton, I will return the results the best I know how.' That opportunity obviously came while a lot of people in the industry were thinking to themselves, 'Should they hire him? What's it going to be like? Will it just be T-shirts and sweatpants and sneakers? Can he really design something within the ethos of the house?' That is more the challenge you are referring to. I don't consider anything a failure; my whole career is based on prototyping and experimenting – it's me finding my voice through every project that I do. What I take away from reflecting on the past is how I am showcasing that, within what was a very particular industry, people who are open-minded and who give other kinds of people a chance can make a path. We are seeing results; we are seeing the upside of diversifying the role of designer; the upside of adopting the new. That is the part that I approach with tremendous care: I care more about making the industry showcase what good can be done. I don't care much about the criticism, because there are 10 new kids who weren't in the conversation but now are. Then there's the person who has been having the same feelings in the same position for 20 years.

Daniel: I'm trying to think of one particular moment for you, but I never feel I have completely reached my potential. There is so much more that can be improved and that is what keeps you evolving and growing. People see our careers *now*, but this is just a live snapshot. To get to this point has been a very long period, with many ups and downs, and learning along the way. As designers, we are extremely critical of ourselves. I certainly am – every collection, product and campaign, I always try and analyse how it can be better.

Jonathan: What are your own personal metrics for success?

Daniel: For me, it is about feeling fulfilled, inspired and connected to what I am doing. I feel that is really a gift because I am very happy with where my life is at right now. Do I think I am successful? Not yet, I am just starting and there is so much more to do.

Virgil: Me, too. It's about staying exactly true to what I see; that is my fulfilment. I think that is what has given me the tough skin to sit in these positions and do the things I do. Ironically, I am not looking for outside validation.

'You just cannot dictate relevance. It is such a gamble; there is no way we can predetermine what will become popular and why.'

Jonathan: Surely everyone does to some extent.

Virgil: Well, I was a shy kid at school, and I wasn't as good at skateboarding or soccer as I wanted to be. So design and art and learning turned out to be exactly what I wanted to do. Making things and seeing them come to life is the ultimate gratification. But I do have a practical answer that fits both Daniel and I, and that is relevance. We are designers; we make things in the hope that they will kick a dent in culture. Like when Daniel's first bags and shoes were released, it changed the whole ecosystem because those were the most beautiful high heels or bags, and they were resonating. We can both have these lofty answers, but at the end of the day those shoes and bags create a moment in an industry in which there are so many options. And that is a tremendous metric. I am never satisfied by things, you know; you'll never hear me say, 'Oh, it's sold out in a day! Yay, I did a good job!' That to me is the whackest thing on earth.

Daniel: You can't dictate that idea of relevance, though. It is such a gamble; there is no way we can predetermine what will become popular and why. There was no strategy behind Bottega, and I don't have the definitive answer. It just became the zeitgeist for some reason. It makes sense and just kind of works.

Jonathan: What comes most intuitively to you and which part do you have to overthink to make happen?

Daniel: The intuitive part is easy for me: it's the design. I went to Central Saint Martins and it was what I studied at university and it is the thing I have been the most comfortable with since graduation. The process is instinctive; it is almost a reaction to a physical object and looking at it in a different way. Design is often like thinking about a problem and trying to find the easiest solution. As for what I overthink the most… That's a hard one. I think in today's society, there is a certain responsibility to how we communicate and the way in which we reach the audience. I really want to make sure I am standing for all the things I believe in; that is where I second guess myself, the casting, the choice of locations, a lot of consideration goes into that.

Virgil: I am maybe eight years in right now, between Off-White and Louis Vuitton. I've got my feet firmly in the industry in a way I understand, from an independent side and big-house side, and I think the part that comes most intuitively to me is conversation. Before I start designing, I start with an hour of just talking to my studio team, like, 'What have you been up to you? What do you think? What's the mood? What are people wearing in London? What do you think about Brexit?' When we get back together, it's going to be just talking because I often turn those conversations into garments or a runway-show idea.

Jonathan: Who are your most fruitful conversations with?

Virgil: The funny truth is that I go to Louis Vuitton stores or Off-White stores and I get into conversations with the salespeople, and find out how they are selling my things. Conversation to me is like my secret weapon. As for what I am overthinking the most… well, the longer I do this, the more responsibility there is – and no matter how optimistic I am, it hasn't always been that easy. Take my second season at Louis Vuitton: the inspiration was Michael Jackson. I did it, everything was fine, but then one month after the show, the documentary came out and the *New York Times* all of a sudden writes this thing saying it was irresponsible of me to do that – as if I could predict the future.[1] That caused a moment of stress because I'm working for a big company that has invested a lot in my inspiration, and the media can look at it and be like, 'That is taboo and bad – why did you do that?' So that makes for tense moments. Another time I threw my staff in Milan a party when the collections were done in March and I put them on my Instagram. It was only meant to be fun, but then people started saying, ‘Oh, Virgil doesn’t have a very diverse office’, and I got a lot flack for that, for not having what is a seemingly diverse staff. It’s 30 Italian people who have worked with me tirelessly from the beginning, growing a small brand into what it is today. So when you bring up moments of overthinking, with the responsibility I have, I can’t talk to someone like I would a friend at the bar. That’s the position I’m in and I understand that I have responsibilities and that there are unfortunate sides to my position. So I overthink putting opinion out there in a tasteful, artful and chic way that doesn’t distract from the message. That takes considerable thinking.

Jonathan: What is the overriding emotion you’ve been feeling over the past few weeks? How would you summarize this period?

Virgil: I keep thinking about what Daniel said in the very beginning: we are in positions where this pandemic is less detrimental. My favourite restaurant just closed and so the staff no longer have jobs; they are unemployed and they don’t know what they are going to do about their rent in two months. That is the grassroots existence for people, so I try to reflect on that just as much as I’m like, ‘Hey, I am enjoying myself.’ I am excited to spend time in a sort of solitude and have a wide perspective, and not just my personal one.

Daniel: I’m feeling gratitude, because I know there have been so many different experiences in this moment and we can be grateful that this moment gave us the opportunity to spend time with our families, to stay home and to reconnect with hobbies that we might have let slide. So my experience has been a positive one.

Virgil: It’s a bit like purgatory; it’s almost like you’re in a track and field race and it’s that moment when you go down into the set before they shoot the gun. I like being busy and I didn’t realize how much I was dictated by a deadline. This situation is unique, not only because everything stopped, but because every future deadline has been moved. I do one thing and then go onto the next, but I’m sitting here, sketching and having ideas, but nothing is sticking. There’s the news, friends are just watching films, and I am listening to tons of music, but no one is putting anything out; there are no shows and stores are closed. That’s a reminder of how much that changes our ecosystem because whether you pay attention to them or not, the shows are always there on the periphery. Also, I can’t exactly lock into what the mood of the day is because people are posting old photos or watching the same film on Netflix. As as soon as culture gets back, then I am going to start latching onto more concreteness.

Daniel: I agree, for the entire first half of the year my diary has been wiped out. The deadlines and the rhythm give you a sense of purpose; it can be quite disorientating to have so much time. I am just not used to it.

Virgil: A lot of my friends are artists, and so they do a show when they’re ready. They exist in solitude; they might go on a trip and paint for months. That reminds me of how much of a personal practice art is. If you took the industry side of what we do away, if we just did a show when we wanted, that would take a different person.

Daniel: Yes, it is not how I operate. I like the deadline; I like the cut-off point. It gives me structure.

Virgil: I had a call this morning with my two studio heads and for them being without a deadline is even worse than for me, because I’m the one who comes in with the ideas, while they are used to a budget and schedule. I think this situation has been disorientating for them. If you look at fashion on an industry level, it’s not just us designers; there are huge teams and that disorientating feeling is going down to every level in fashion brands. The factory where I ordered the trims and the fabrics is now closed, all the research I was doing is an old idea now, how do I rev that up and change my fabric selection or colour palette? All these sorts of things are stuck. The fact that restaurants are closed is really bleak… because people buy clothes and have that aspirational thing to go out to a restaurant or wherever, where fashion fulfils a need. Restaurants and nightclubs are the stages for fashion; people needs those settings. And right now those are closed and they won’t reopen in the short term, so it’s like where are all the ideas going to live? What is the future of our output? The ‘stage’ has been paused.

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1. Abloh’s Michael Jackson-inspired Louis Vuitton Autumn/Winter 2019-2020 menswear collection was shown on 17 January 2019. The 190-minute documentary *Leaving Neverland*, which contained detailed allegations of child sexual abuse by the singer was broadcast on HBO in the US on 3 March. The *New York Times* article, titled ‘Michael Jackson as Muse? Louis Vuitton Has Some Explaining to Do’, was published on 13 March, nearly two months after the collection’s presentation.

Yoon Ahn and Hiroshi Fujiwara

‘To be honest, I kind of like this pace.’

Yoon Ahn and Hiroshi Fujiwara
in conversation, 20 April 2020.

Hiroshi Fujiwara: Hello! How are you?
Yoon Ahn: I am fine. You?
Hiroshi: I am OK. Not completely fine, but alive…
Yoon: Have you been staying at home?
Hiroshi: I have. Are you in the office?
Yoon: Yes. My studio and my house are just a few minutes apart, but it’s better to work in the office.
Hiroshi: I don’t see many people there.
Yoon: We divide ourselves into two groups. The basic rule is that we work from home, of course, but as soon as people need to ‘create’ something, it’s impossible for them to work from home, so one half comes one day, then the other half comes the next. We split the week up to try to have as few people as possible in at the same time. How long have you been staying at home?
Hiroshi: It’s been about two weeks, I think. Most of the time. I carry on working at home, doing things that can still be done from home. How about you?
Yoon: I do have things that can continue, but for some plans, involving work with other countries, such as photo shoots, we are stuck. And if I have to make the video travel series, what am I supposed to do? We can carry on planning, but we don’t know when we’ll be able to realize anything from those plans. We can’t see our next move. I check the news from other countries, and this situation could continue for over a year...

‘If the world changes and people get a new perspective on their lifestyles, the way we’ve been selling and doing business won’t work any more.’

Hiroshi: Things might calm down, but even then I am pretty sure it will be a bit difficult to travel.
Yoon: I feel scared, of course, of this situation with Covid-19, but I am even more scared about how the world’s economy might change. I am making things to sell, so if the world changes and people get a new perspective on their lifestyles, the way we’ve been selling and doing business just won’t work any more. I’ll have to plan brand new, totally different things from scratch. That is a concern at the moment. I’m worried, to be honest, because I can’t see what comes next, although at the same time, half of my mind is excited about a new start.
Hiroshi: I understand how you feel. Speaking for myself, I usually don’t work on a particularly big scale, so there isn’t a major change to my way of working. Most of my job is producing or designing products for brands and companies, and it’s not my job to think about how to sell them. That’s a job for my clients. So my work style isn’t affected that much by this situation.
Yoon: If people’s lifestyles change, then their habits will change. If their values are going to change, their outlooks are going to change. Even if we go back to something we could call ‘normal’, it is not going to be the same as it was before Covid-19. I just wonder whether people are really going to change for the better, or if it’s going to get more chaotic.
Hiroshi: Maybe it’ll be a return to… not six months ago or a year ago, but maybe 20 or 30 years ago. Things might become smaller.
Yoon: Yes. More local, more intimate. To be honest, I quite enjoy the limitation. Things have been getting so rushed. Everything’s always about new, new, new. You have to pump things out all the time. In a way, Covid-19 has forced everybody to slow down. Not just in Japan, or the US; everybody has to stop, almost. We can kind of breathe now.
Hiroshi: You sort of had to follow the leader and fit into a system – in the fashion industry, too. But now you can do whatever you want.
Yoon: Yes, definitely. To be honest, people in Japan are all talking about Covid now, but because I often work overseas, I’ve followed the whole situation pretty closely from the end of January. I remember that after Paris Fashion Week, in February, I was heading to Milan and I got a call just as I was about to get on the plane saying that it was about to be locked down, so don’t come, because if I did, I wouldn’t be able to leave. That’s when I realized that something really serious was happening. It had just been in China, but now it was also going to be in Europe, the UK, Germany. In a way, I have been mentally prepared since February, because that was a wake-up call for me. It was a scary phone call to get.
Hiroshi: Yes. It was a strange moment. I was hearing news from China and we were worried about the Olympic Games,[1] and in February London’s mayor even said: ‘Oh, we can do the Olympics for you.’ And then, all of a sudden, Europe was kind of closed, but Japan stayed the same.
Yoon: I found it quite strange that Italy was seeing so much infection, and that the numbers were growing there. Wasn’t Japan like the second country to get corona, right up there with China?[2]
Hiroshi: I think so. We were kind of scared and worried. We didn’t know what was going to happen.
Yoon: Who knows, maybe they hid it because they wanted to do the Olympics! The thing with Covid-19, I think, is that it’s shed a light on all these underlying issues. It’s definitely has a big impact, but those issues were already there. All this recession talk, these messed-up banking systems… Healthy people get the virus, but a lot of the people who get it have underlying health issues. Maybe that’s part of it. Who knows, but if the numbers are right, then I’m thankful that the spread is not as bad as in some other countries. My work is mostly in America, France and Italy; America is the worst right now, Italy got hit really bad, and France is really bad, too. Even if you have to go, you get quarantined for 14 days.

‘I’ve lived in Shibuya for almost 15 years without ever really going for a walk, and last week I noticed all these things that I’d never noticed before.’

Hiroshi: I hope it’s going to stay like this here. That there won’t be an explosion.
Yoon: I know. Hopefully, they can get the number down, but if people don’t follow the rules… There’s talk of a second wave after people go back to a normal way of working. It’s something that we have to face. I think, like the flu, it’s going to become a part of our lives. Maybe it’s just going to be one of those things that happens and then goes down. Maybe we’ll have a ‘corona season’; maybe we’ll get a vaccine. Who knows. It’s definitely not going to go away. We just have to deal with it.
Hiroshi: We have to learn for the future.
Yoon: You’ve been staying home for two weeks. Have you done anything fun?
Hiroshi: Not really. I’m getting together keyboards and guitars, so that I can make music without going the studio.
Yoon: That’s fun.
Hiroshi: It’s good. You can do a lot in the house. I’m good at being at home, at being alone, but I know that if somebody says, ‘Don’t go out’, it makes me want to go out.
Yoon: Do you go for walks?
Hiroshi: I go for lunch sometimes, but not for a walk. Maybe I should! I’ve just been sitting or lying down for almost two weeks… [Laughs]
Yoon: I’ve started walking a lot, actually. I’m exactly like you: if somebody says ‘stay’, it makes me want to go. And because a lot of people are staying home, it’s nice to go for a walk in the morning, with nobody on the street. I’ve lived in Shibuya for almost 15 years without ever really going for a walk, and last week I noticed all these things that I’d never noticed before. It kind of made me sad. Even after living here for so long I still don’t know everything because I always go to the same places, take the same routes. When I went for a walk last week, I went to areas I would never visit when I’m busy. I just walked for eight kilometres and discovered the backstreets and all of these little things. I liked it. It was nice not to be chased by time, either. I didn’t even look at my watch. I just walked and walked and walked. It was the most fun I’ve had in a long time, just walking.
Hiroshi: And I’ve been talking. Mostly this way…
Yoon: Yeah – Zoom, all the time! Are you catching up on movies or TV shows? Because I saw that you saw *Tiger King*. I watched that, too. It was funny! There’s a lot of weird people, but it’s funny, isn’t it? It’s crazy.
Hiroshi: I can kind of understand… When I was a kid, I wanted to have tigers. It was huge in the 1980s or 1990s, with the white tigers in Las Vegas.[3]
Yoon: I didn’t know it was such a big industry to breed tigers and sell them in the US. I was quite surprised by that. Isn’t it hard to have tigers? Maybe they can in the US because there’s so much land.
Hiroshi: I think they just call them ‘big cats’. [Laughs] How about your store? It’s closed, right? Do you do online?
Yoon: Yes, online only, because of the government guidelines.
Hiroshi: I hear that stores are already opening up in China, Shanghai and Beijing. And maybe next month, Italy will open again. It’s kind of scary.
Yoon: We have to open up. You have to get the economy going. That’s where it’s kind of tricky, because if people don’t go to work and spend, then there isn’t any money going around. We have to get back into a rhythm, socially and economically. Europe and America have been in lockdown for almost two months now… Even if they have to go back to work, it’s going to take a while for them to go back to the way they were.
Hiroshi: It’s a change of tempo. Maybe we were at 150bpm, and we’re going back to 80bpm.
Yoon: A worldwide recession is everybody’s issue. I wonder, when people actually return to work, are they going

to spend their money on clothes? Most likely not for a long time. It might be two years until things pick up again. I've been very aware of what might-happen for months now. Japan got Covid-19 right after China, and when Japan closed its borders to Chinese tourists back in January we noticed a sudden drop in sales, and we had to make new plans for everything. We've prepared a little bit, but it's going to be interesting in the next few months to see how it's going to go.

Hiroshi: I don't think we really need to go back to normal. People think that they want to go back to normal, but it's going to be a different world.

Yoon: To be honest, I kind of like this pace. I can actually read now; I can walk; I'm not always in a rush. It's cool. Before, I had so much work that I had to work on weekends as well. Now, I can take weekends off, so on Saturdays and Sundays I've been doing online courses on different topics. It's fun. There's this thing called MasterClass.com, and you can sign up and take different courses. I've been taking classes in economics and photography. And I've been cooking a lot. That's fun, too.

Hiroshi: I find that I'm always thinking about the future, about what will happen after all this, and I don't really feel negative at all. I just have to do what I have to do.

Yoon: How do you think Japan is going to change? Japan has always had its own system and its own flow, but what's happening right now is going to impact the whole world. Future labour – that's something that I think about. There aren't enough young people here to work in the workforce, and that's going to become a real issue very soon that the government has to deal with. Governments are actually calling industries to back out of China to make them more local, but even if they do that, who is going to do the work? There isn't enough labour, unless they open up immigration. But are they going to do that with Covid-19 around?

Hiroshi: Maybe things will shrink a little bit, and not be as big as before. Maybe it'll be more fun, like a new beginning.

Yoon: We'll see. Are you making new songs right now?

Hiroshi: Yes, I just finished my new album. It was going to come out in June, but I don't know if it's still happening.

Yoon: Did you work on that in the past two weeks, during the quarantine?

Hiroshi: Yes. I know many musicians or artists who do a lot of their work at home.

Yoon: I actually started to do iPad painting. It's quite fun. You should try it!

Hiroshi: iPad what?

Yoon: iPad painting! Have you seen David Hockney's book?[4] There was a recent one with all of the paintings he'd done on an iPad over the past few years, and they actually look amazing. It inspired me to start doing iPad painting; you paint with a pen on your iPad.

Hiroshi: So next I'll see them on your T-shirts.

Yoon: Umm, no… [Laughs] Some things are best kept private!

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1. On 24 March, the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games were postponed and rescheduled for 23 July-8 August 2021.

2. The Japanese government reported its first case of Covid-19 to the World Health Organization on 16 January 2020. It was only the second case detected outside of China; the first had been reported in Thailand three days earlier.

3. In the 1990s, Las Vegas's most celebrated white tigers belonged to German-born American magicians Siegfried Fischbacher and Roy Horn, who used the animals during a long-running show at the Mirage hotel. On 3 October 2003, Mantecore, a 200-kilogram white tiger, attacked Horn, biting his neck, crushing his windpipe and dragging him offstage. Mantecore died of natural causes aged 17 in 2014; Horn survived the attack, but died of complications from Covid-19 on 8 May 2020.

4. Published in Feburary 2020, *My Window* brings together 120 of the paintings that British artist David Hockney has created on iPhone and iPad since 2009. All the works show the view from the window of his home in Yorkshire.

Jonathan Anderson and Hans Ulrich Obrist

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'I work in a job to do with touch,
and right now I can't touch anything.'

Jonathan Anderson and
Hans Ulrich Obrist in conversation,
22 April 2020.

Hans Ulrich Obrist: Hi, Jonathan. To begin with the beginning: we are living in a challenging time and this is perhaps a moment to reflect on the state of the planet. It is a moment to think about its future, and also a moment of slowing down. How have the past couple of weeks been for you? What's been your experience of lockdown?

Jonathan Anderson: Actually, we started off feeling slightly confused. Like, is this actually happening? That was the beginning. Weirdly, because I work in Paris and obviously in fashion, I could see this was starting in January, that it was starting to become a problem. When China started to go into lockdown, I didn't think it would get to this extent, but I could see that there was starting to be anxiety. When I was doing my show in Paris [on February 28], I wasn't even sure it was going to happen. By March I had succumbed to the idea that this was going in one direction. At home, my initial reaction was to spring clean. I have cleaned every cupboard, every window. A cleaning out is a way to get away from the reality of the situation, and it means that you are working. And then as time goes on you start to think of the bigger picture. I have watched the news every day. I haven't avoided it; sometimes I feel I would rather know the reality of what's happening in real time. But it's a weird one. I work in a job to do with touch and I can't touch anything. I work with something that is all about teamwork, which we can try and do via the computer, but… I think that through this process you start to realize the fundamentals. There are a lot of people speculating about what the future of fashion is going to be, what the future of art will be or what the car industry will be. I don't think it is going to be an immediate revolution or radical change; it is going to be a slow revolution. I think people have a lot of time on their hands. I think it will be progressive. Nature is telling us that it cannot go on like this. So it might actually create long-term solutions, instead of short-term ones. In a weird way, it would be good if it doesn't flip too quickly because it would be good to come up with constructive things, rather than things that won't last. I have been Googling a lot about the Great Depression in America and other parts of the world, and how, leading up to the crash, there was a high on consumerism before it really hit in. I'm wondering if the same is going to happen. We could see a high, but then reality is going to hit. I think it's going to be like hitting a glass wall.

'If I can keep 1,000 people employed at Loewe and 80 at JW, there is an ecosystem around those people's jobs. That is what gets me through this.'

Hans Ulrich: It is also a moment, of course, where we think about supporting people. Helen Levitt[1] told me about the New Deal. During the Roosevelt years, the government in America launched this big operation to employ 10,000 artists, who were actually paid salaries, and to open community centres. The most difficult thing now is for the young people who are emerging. So many young artists can no longer pay the rent in London, so I think it is important to think about larger-scale support, like a new New Deal, with larger-scale governmental initiatives. That is something I have been thinking about a lot recently. Public art projects, for example. Of course, another reaction to the crisis is my friend Daniel Humm, who has Eleven Madison Park, and in just a few days turned this Michelin-starred restaurant into a kitchen for people in need. Of course, some fashion brands are making masks. What are your thoughts on how we can help in this current moment?

Jonathan: Talking about the art initiatives, I looked back to World War Two and what happened then, when you had a British government initiative to send people like Henry Moore to do pictures on the Underground and document the situation. Now, when we look back we are happy that that was funded, because it created memorable images that were not just some throwaway; they were more like a reinterpretation. One image that always comes to mind is Paul Nash's pictures of the trees at the end of World War One, where there's this landscape that looks kind of futuristic but is ultimately a viewpoint of the world falling apart. With Loewe, we have worked on building and extending our platform on craft with a series called *En Casa*, which is about helping people by using our larger audience to promote them. In the coming months we will extend that, so our consumers can buy directly from them. And then we have the Loewe Craft Prize, and a lot of initiatives with art that we will keep in place and extend. With Loewe, we have obviously used manufacturing capabilities to make masks, and at the same time Loewe is working with an NGO working with children in Spain. With JW Anderson, we are helping out a charity for homeless LGBTQ youth. For me, this is just the beginning, in terms of corporate responsibility. I've always believed that when I joined Loewe, I was put in a privileged position, which meant we had to work out ways of giving back, such as funding artists through the exhibitions we stage in Miami. Loewe is a platform as well, in a weird way. Artists can gain other customers through us, because – and I think this is one thing art and fashion have in common at the moment, and that we'll see more of in the next 24 months – ultimately, art and fashion are both luxury goods. A lot of it can only be consumed by the one percent. It's about what that trickle-down effect can do to help. I have been amazed by the different things that have come up, from the most unlikely companies. This big gallery launched this thing called Platform that is helping younger galleries to sell work; I think that was really smart. It's about getting money, sure, but it is also about building initiatives that could be long-standing after this moment. I thought that was quite humble – the big guy helping out the small guy. After this, we cannot revert back to where we were. My own work was getting incredibly fast, and you could not process at that rate. Now, when I look back on the past four or five weeks, I feel like now I would organize my day completely differently; I wouldn't work in the same way. I don't want to go back and work within the same construct. I think that needs to change, and a lot of my staff will realize that through this process, too. That a lot more can done without this continual pressure in terms of timelines.

'Lots of people are speculating about the future of fashion. I don't think it's going to be an immediate or radical change; it's going to be a slow revolution.'

Hans Ulrich: That's a really great point, because obviously it is important not to go back to where we were before because the environmental crisis will need us to work in different ways, by limiting growth and being sustainable. Talking about the economy, I wanted to ask about your beginnings. I began in the late 1980s, early 1990s, and the stock-exchange crash of 1989 happened while I was at university. My beginning as a curator coincided with a recession. I did my first show in a kitchen. I had a budget of €200 and it was very intimate. All my early shows had that DIY spirit. I find it very interesting that you launched your label in 2008, which was also a recession. Tell us a bit about your beginnings, and the beginning of your label within a recession.

Jonathan: What is interesting is that when you start something, you have blinkers on. You don't really see what is happening in the rest of the world, because all you believe in is what you're starting. When I look back at that moment, even selling one T-shirt was a huge deal; I wasn't really looking at what was happening globally, because all I cared about was making. The situation now is much harder because my business is much bigger; in the beginning, it didn't matter. Whatever was going to be the outcome was going to be the outcome anyway. I didn't have 50 staff; it was like me and three other people, trying to make something. In a weird way, it is quite nice to start at rock bottom, especially when everything else is at rock bottom, because you can only go up. Plus, in that moment it was never just about selling, it was more about the idea, and I do miss that sometimes. That fascinating moment of discovery. Actually, I think creativity is at its best when you don't have anything.

Hans Ulrich: How did you come to fashion or how did fashion come to you? I was wondering if you had an epiphany. For me, it was seeing Giacometti's sculptures at the age of 10 or 11, and then meeting Fischli and Weiss when I was 17 in Switzerland – that sort of made me a curator.

Jonathan: I had gone to a university in Washington DC to study acting, and I wanted to be an actor in musical theatre, but in the second year I stopped enjoying it. My dad was coaching a rugby team in Dublin and said that I was going to have to pay back the tuition money, so I decided to apply for a job at Brown Thomas, which is a department store in Dublin and I got it. It was a time when Tom Ford was designing for Gucci and YSL; Hedi Slimane had started doing Dior's menswear. It was a moment when menswear had broken out into something else, and there was an actual interest in men's fashion. I was working in the store and this unassuming, but very stylish woman came in. It was Manuela Pavesi, who was the visual communications director for Prada windows, and a best friend of Miuccia Prada. I didn't know this at the time, but because I was working in the store and wearing the product, she was like, 'Do a rack for me. How would you do it?' At the time, the store wasn't very big, so I mixed Prada Sport and mainline together on one rack and she really liked the idea. It wasn't just separated. And she said that if I ever came to London, she would give me a job. In my head, though, I had to go back to university, so I applied to every school and ended up being offered a course at London College of Fashion for menswear. One day I went into Prada Bond Street to pick up this magazine that they used to do and she was there, saying, 'You never contacted me, but you can start today.' So that was when I started working with her. She was the catalyst; the person who made me. I grew up in Ireland, and you would never meet a character like her. In a weird way, I was more obsessed by the character and the wildness of this person, more than the fashion. It was fascinating to watch someone wearing pyjamas, crocodile loafers, a men's anorak, a crocodile bag and a Tesco bag doing a store window and having a tantrum. I wasn't used to any of that, so I fell in love with her character and the more I learned the more I became obsessed by the business. I started off by loving the idea of the visual communication of the window.

'When I was at drama school, I was obsessed with James Dean. I know that sounds completely naff, but I think I read every book on him I could find.'

Hans Ulrich: In a previous interview you said that at that time you learned to have an emotional connection to the brand. I think that is very interesting…

Jonathan: When I worked for Prada, there was only Prada in my head. You were under the spell of it. It was incredibly emotional because you would be waiting to see the next collection; you wanted to know what it was about. You might hate it in the beginning, but then you would love it mid-season. And it was part of working with that clothing on a daily basis, trying to reinterpret it over the season, trying to sell it. You just became part of that cult of Prada. There was a moment when Miuccia had done a show with feathered hats, peacock dresses; it was an amazing moment, like a meeting of Courrèges and Portobello Road. It was very eclectic. Together, we were all part of the team; it was like Prada against the world in terms of competing against other fashion. You became part of that family, and you would have done anything to protect it.

Hans Ulrich: And were there any other inspirations? The future is always invented with fragments of the past. Who else inspired you from history or from the past?

Jonathan: When I was at drama school, I was obsessed with James Dean. I know that sounds completely naff, but I think I read every book on him I could find. And at that time in Washington DC, you could see old films in cinemas where you could still smoke. Smoking was a really bad habit that I had in DC, which probably began just because I was able to smoke in a cinema and it was so novel! In those films, there was something about that 1950s stylistic moment that I found so sexually appealing. When I worked with Manuela Pavesi and I was still at school, I became obsessed with an Irish designer. I'm from Ireland and I didn't think there were many people from Ireland in fashion, but there was one designer during the war called Digby Morton.

Hans Ulrich: I don't know him. What is his name?

Jonathan: Digby Morton, and you will probably know this image; it's a very powerful image, actually quite in keeping with today. I can't remember if it was for *Bazaar* or for *Vogue*. It's a woman with her back turned, in front of a building that is falling down and it was a kind of turning point during the war, and the model is wearing a Digby Morton suit.[2] It was, in a weird way, very close in time to the New Look. A lot of people refer to that image as being a Dior suit, but it is actually Digby Morton, and it was this idea of looking at the utilitarianism of a men's suit, repurposing fabrics during the war. He did uniforms for the Red Cross and things like that, as well. So I have always been into heavyweight fabric in terms of clothing. It's very industrial.

Hans Ulrich: That's interesting that he would design for the Red Cross. Super timely for now, very interesting. How are you seeing the future?

Jonathan: I have spoken to Pascale [Lepoivre], the CEO of Loewe, and to Jenny [Galimberti], the CEO of JW Anderson every evening for the past six weeks. It's not been about trying to work out what the future is, but where the touchpoints could be. And one thing that I think is sad, but interesting at the same time, is that 10% of people who are dying are of an older generation, so there will be huge parts of a generation that will quickly vanish without saying goodbye. And I think there will be a discovery of the notion of nostalgia, through the loss of loved ones. If society is smart, we might, through that process, be able to hold onto memories through tactility instead of only through a digital focus. The first two

weeks of quarantine, I couldn't look at social media. I found it really upsetting and disturbing, because it was just recreational outrage. Parts of the world were at different moments. People's realities were different in London to in Italy. It became very confusing and I didn't want to look at fashion or see fashion imagery. I felt like it was completely unimportant.

Hans Ulrich: That's a great idea about this discovery and the loved ones. We live in an age where we have more and more information but that does not necessarily mean we have more memories. Maybe amnesia is at the core of the digital age. I wanted to ask you one more question about the beginnings. I think it is very rare that a person will cry in an art exhibition and in fashion shows – people cry more in cinemas – but I was talking to Raf Simons the other day, who told me about this early Margiela show he saw, it was the famous White show, with a lot of kids in north-east Paris [Spring/Summer 1990]. It was a legendary show. And Raf was saying that not only did he cry at the time, but each time he tells the story he starts to cry, and then he started to cry when he was talking to me. He said that when he saw that show, that was the moment when he knew he would become a fashion designer. So I was wondering if you had seen any fashion shows where you cried.

'We live in an age where we have more information but that does not mean we have more memories. Maybe amnesia is at the core of the digital age.'

Jonathan: I have never cried at a fashion show, but when I have done Loewe there have been a few shows that have been so exhausting, and to see it being realized and to see everyone's momentum, you do get quite upset, somehow. You know you have done all this work and then where does it all go? But I am more likely to cry in the cinema than at a fashion show. Maybe it is harder for me. It is such a personal thing. I find it very difficult to be attached to someone else's work. It's harder emotionally for me.

Hans Ulrich: That brings us to the next chapter of the interview, which is to talk about some of your landmark shows. From all of the many, many shows you have done, what are the ones that are dearest to you?

Jonathan: I remember the key ones that really changed things for me, whether or not they were full collections, because there were many collections that were more like look books, not fully formed collections. The first one, I did something with paisley, with latex collars. It was a very strange collection, very boyish. And that was the first one when I did men's and women's. It was this idea of a shared wardrobe. But when I look back at the collections, I think the one that was a real turning point was made out of military felt, and there was a look that was ruffled shorts with knee-high boots and a bustier crop top on men. I remember it was in an old warehouse and it was done to music with Angel Haze. I was so excited about the show, and then the next morning the *Daily Mail* said that I had destroyed masculinity. It was really seething, like 'Why would the British Fashion Council sponsor things like this?'[3] It was a weird awakening, but whenever I get requests to borrow from the archives, it's always for that look. It was a very simplistic idea, a very basic fabric, and it was a turning point for me in terms of, 'OK, it may not make sense in the moment, but you stuck your neck out and really became part of it.'

Hans Ulrich: I loved that collection. When I saw images of it first, it made me think of Joseph Beuys.

Jonathan: Maybe two years before that, I did a very small collection that was made out of the same felt that Beuys used for the room with the piano;[4] I was really obsessed by that. It was one of the most gross fabrics, because it falls apart in your hands and is very itchy, but I have always been into felt because you don't have to finish the edge. It doesn't fray when you cut it, so you can do very basic silhouettes. And I have always been drawn to people like Beuys; this idea of simple cutting, but through the action you get volume. It's a painter's canvas, and it is so interesting how you gain volume through mistakes. You know, when you cut things too big, the shape is more exciting than the piece itself. And the action of performance too. It is so difficult looking back at collections because you start to hate some of them. With the first collection with Loewe, there was the excitement of having been given a job for a bigger brand. I did it at UNESCO [in Paris], which we still use. I think there was something in that collection; we'd basically spent a year trying to work out how to put the DNA back into that brand, which had been going for nearly 200 years. Then there was a collection we did in plastic, which we would never do again. We used all this heat-sealed technology, where all the seams were heat treated. It was super fascinating to do that collection, but now it would be completely unethical. When I look at the last three womenswear shows that we have done at Loewe, I think I have got into a bit of a pace with it. The last show I really loved, and, in a weird way, with this whole situation, I'm kind of glad that every show is like your last show, because there won't be any shows this year. I worked with Takuro Kuwata, a ceramicist who I have known for many, many years, which was my first clothing collaboration with a living artist, and it was a really nice moment to do it. In a weird way, it feels like an end. When I look at those collections, it feels like they were done five years ago. It's only been six weeks!

Hans Ulrich: Can you tell me a bit more about those recent collections?

Jonathan: I feel that, for the first time, one collection was not stronger than the other. Sometimes I have moments where I am more engaged with my own brand and less engaged with Loewe. It depends on the season. But there was something where they were both about volumes, but with two different messages. At JW, I think the pattern cutting, the technology, the craftsmanship that we were able to achieve without couture-house backing, was fantastic. The volumes were very new and exciting. We had that large coat with a big collar; it is very simple but the actual construction was incredibly complicated. There was an ease to it. We had been looking at moments in the 1920s and the 1940s, after the boom period and before the collapse; now it's weird how it has all collapsed. Sometimes I feel that when we do come back – and we will – it was nice to end on a high and that we can start building from there again. As much as it is fashion and it's not art, it is quite nice that it was a show that probably won't be sold very much. And it will go down as the last show before the world imploded. I am glad that everyone put their full effort into that last one, without actually knowing things were going to end. That is probably the beauty of it.

'For the first two weeks of quarantine, I didn't want to look at fashion or see fashion imagery. I felt like it was completely unimportant.'

Hans Ulrich: When you took over Loewe – and again this has a lot to do with the current moment – there was a pause; there was a silence. I mean, you worked a lot, but you didn't do any shows for 18 months, and it is great that LVMH let you do that, because usually the fashion industry has these relentless rhythms, and designers often complain about how fast those rhythms are. You talk about the slowness right now, but you did that already at that moment with Loewe.

Jonathan: The biggest thing about that slowness is that it gives you time to make mistakes in private. The problem with fashion is that we are obsessed by – and this might change now – but we are obsessed by failure. It is very heightened and addictive in terms of competition and profit. This has changed the job of a fashion designer. In those 18 months I was able to go through every single department and see every single employee and work out what was working and what was not. If you are working for a big brand you cannot just be a designer; you have to be the HR person; you have to understand a bit about finance. I would never do any project in the future unless I had a period of at least a year to understand it. These brands are so old and have such a fine balance and a language that is all built over that period. You cannot just do a collection the following season. I wouldn't have been able to put my mind into it.

Hans Ulrich: I also know that you needed to think about the brand and to think about the logo, and you worked with my very dear friends Mathias and Michael at M/M (Paris), friends we have in common, and who were very important for me. In the 1990s, curators were invisible and I was shy about putting my name on stuff, and they basically created a brand for me. I want to know how you worked with them, and how they redesigned the logo and reinvented the brand in those 18 months.

Jonathan: I remember saying to M/M that I wanted a blank page with Loewe at the top, like a standardised A4 piece of paper, but that the font needs to change. I felt that I wanted to be able to draw or do a sketch on a white page and that that could be the advertisement. So they looked at the history of Germany and Spain and they took all of the baroque layers off Loewe. In a weird way, it became more German, in terms of the lines of it. They also made this research book, this kind of fantasy book that we put together for Delphine Arnault. That is where the one of the nicest ideas came up, I had this Meisel image from a story he did in 1997 called 'Interpretation'.[5] It was all images inspired by American painter, Alex Katz and there was this amazing image of kids on a beach. And we decided there was no point reshooting this image because it had already had the art reference and the fashion reference, so instead of reshooting it, we just put it out as the campaign. Something like that is why it took a long time to start. If you get off on the wrong foot, it is very difficult to backtrack. I've seen it with other brands where people rush in and they get it wrong, and then it is very difficult to backtrack because the thought process of the media is so short and there are so many brands.

Hans Ulrich: It is interesting that you have these two brands: your own with its flagship store that recently opened in London, just before the Covid-19 lockdown, and Loewe. I wanted to ask you about the difference. In old interviews, you said that JW Anderson is there to agitate and to get things wrong, and that Loewe is more cultural and processes culture. Can you explain that to me? How do you differentiate between the two brands? And how does that happen with the brain during the day? When you wake up in the morning, are there days you devote to Loewe and days you devote to JW, or is it all just one holistic experience?

'The problem with fashion is that we're obsessed by failure. It's heightened in terms of competition and profit. This has changed the job of a designer.'

Jonathan: One is in London and the other is in Paris, and there's the Eurostar, so I have this thing that when I go through the tunnel I am in a different landscape. London and Paris are so incredibly different culturally and there are two different teams. So when I am there, I am 100% there, and when I am at JW, I am 100% here. There might be threads between them. I can't do one fashion show and then say two weeks later that everything that was done then is irrelevant. It is kind of about building two different languages. That idea of JW as a cultural agitator; I think there is a youthful friction in it that it is more naive, more crafty, less refined. This idea of the excitement of throwing it out there. And then at Loewe you've got the weight of a leather house and everything is bigger. It has one of the oldest bag ateliers in the world; you have the facilities to do more refinement. Whereas JW Anderson bags have more of an angst to them. With Loewe it is all about the leather – the leather is the logo in itself somehow. I'm not saying it's easy. Ultimately there is a thread, there is an 'I', but I think the biggest thing is having two very distinct teams that you have two dialogues with. I can't do what I do without having some of the best people in the world to work with. I feel that sometimes I am a director or I conduct, and they are both showing very different forms of information because they are two different teams. I know how to push each team in different ways and some can be pushed harder than others.

Hans Ulrich: There is also this idea, in my field, I would call it guest curating, where we go into other institutions. In fashion, the guest curating thing is doing something for a brand that is not yours, at Moncler Genius, for example. And you did something for Topshop, which was going outside the luxury industry. I was wondering if you could talk about going into other brands.

Jonathan: The first one I did was Topshop, and that was, like, 10 years ago. It was the first time doing it, and I think you really learn something. I do one with Uniqlo; I do Moncler, and we have many other ones. And what I enjoy about it is being able to go into a brand that you like or respect and to kind of screw with it. When I worked with Converse, it was super exiting. And you can work with their technology. I have always believed in collaboration, as long as it is not one-sided. I think if both parties gain from it then it is good collaboration, but when it is done for financial gain, it never works. It should be about learning. I love working with Uniqlo because of Mr Yanai.[6] I think he is such a fascinating businessperson. I really like his mindset and I learn from that. It is all about restraint. When you are a designer, you want to do more and he is more restrained. It's about focusing and it is good sometimes not to get too comfortable with your own aesthetic, either.

Hans Ulrich: I am also interested in the way that you collaborate with designers, with visual artists, and with charity organizations, such as Knot on my Planet and Visual AIDS. Can you talk about these collaborations that also give the whole discussion a more political edge?

Jonathan: With Visual AIDS, I love what they do and it kind of fits in with artists who I really like. I love doing Knot on my Planet, too. It's raised incredible amounts of money and has increased visibility for elephants. And it really helps. And the Eye Loewe Nature project, which is about upcycling clothing at Loewe. With an NGO, we have been able to develop taking plastic from the ocean and turning it into spheres to go onto reservoirs to stop the evaporation of water. Or working with knitwear companies to take plastic and turn it into knitwear. All of these things enrich my day because there is a guilt to working in fashion . Sometimes I think that if I were a painter, I would think the same. There is guilt when a painting is sold for €18 million. A bag that is incredibly expensive is absurd, but when I have these moments, especially now, I remember that my responsibility is to design something that is incredibly well made and that keeps these people in jobs. At the start of this particular period, I was not crying at the idea of fashion, but at my own reality in this job. I felt quite powerless that this virus was killing loads of people and what could I do? I started by panicking and judging myself, thinking that I have space and some people don't, and beginning to go into a guilt complex. But through the days and weeks since then, I have accepted that I can't cure the virus and we can only make non-medical grade masks, but we can donate money. And if I can keep 1,000 people employed at Loewe and a further 80 people employed at JW, there is an ecosystem around all of those people's lives and jobs. That is what gets me through this. In the evening, when I speak to Pascale at Loewe, I'm, like, 'If we can save every single job then we have done a good job, no matter what the bottom line is.'

'An expensive bag is absurd, but I know that my responsibility is to design something that is incredibly well made and that keeps people in jobs.'

Hans Ulrich: I know that you have ventured into curating. You did a show at the Hepworth in Wakefield.[7] Can you tell us about this project?

Jonathan: The Hepworth approached me a long time ago. They actually approached me to a do a retrospective of my own clothing, but I said that was not possible. I have always wanted to explore this idea of art being fashion and fashion being art, and it was an amazing project. A week before opening I was panicking about the pressure of doing something in an art institution and being judged, but my idea was about looking at the way bodies are disobedient and how, during the 1940s, Dior and others were changing different parts of the body in different materials, while Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth were both working with textiles. At that period, there was no hierarchy between fashion, architecture, ceramics and design. The idea was that everything had to be on the same level, shown in the same way. Curating that exhibition was a really massive learning process. I could look at things that I was inspired by and start to understand them, as if a magpie had put them into one room. And at Miami every year we do *Chance Encounters*.[8] I'm really obsessed by studio ceramics, so each year it's creating dialogues between a living artist and a dead artist and how people can interpret different things. The first one we did was Paul Nash's photographs of trees, and it was looking at light and surface. I don't do it to be an art curator; I do it to show all the different things that inspire me in what I do. It is more like a physical mood board.

Hans Ulrich: Ceramics are important to you?

Jonathan: Yes, too important! I would eat nothing for the month if I could collect ceramics, I am a complete hoarder…

Hans Ulrich: You have a collection?

Jonathan: Yes, my grandfather was a collector of English delftware and through him I became obsessed with ceramics. I collect primarily British studios.

Hans Ulrich: I want to ask you my only recurring question in all the interviews, which is about unrealized projects. We know a lot about those of architects because they publish them all the time, but we know less about those by fashion designers. I think it is interesting to think about why they haven't been realized: are they too big, too small, too utopian, too expensive? Or have they been censored? As my friend Doris Lessing said, there are projects that are *self*-censored. Tell me about a bit about your favourite unrealized projects.

Jonathan: When I joined Loewe, I kept putting this idea on the table: I wanted to build a cube with the models appearing from a horizon line on the ground. The audience would look at a flat horizon and they would come from the ground, from staircases; I'd been looking at Leonardo de Vinci's staircases. Every time we go and try to do it, there isn't the budget or there's not enough space to be able to cope with it. The other one at Loewe was about to start and now it's been cancelled again: the Loewe store in Barcelona is in one of the four architect buildings that were built with Gaudí on Passeig de Gràcia.[9] We have the apartments above it and since I have joined I have been determined to open a foundation for Loewe to put all the art that we have collected over the last six years into this one place. Every moment that it is nearly about to start, we still can't do it. They are probably very expensive projects. My big one this year for that space, which has been nagging at me for six years and still hasn't been realized, is that I have this weird vision of Zurbarán's picture of a lamb[10] and I was also looking at Magdalene Odundo, who did these Brancusi-esque head-like sculptures and vases. The building in Barcelona is very baroque, and I have this vision of having Zurbarán's sheep in the opening room. It's never going to happen, but you never know...

Hans Ulrich: Do you have any advice for a young student of fashion or a young fashion designer?

Jonathan: I always say the same thing: never compromise within what you do. That doesn't mean not making mistakes, I just think you should not compromise on your own agenda. I think you can be derailed by asking for too much advice. Sometimes it is better not to have that, but to stick to what you believe in. My dad always tells this story where two guys go to a forest to cut trees. They are cutting trees all day when one of the brothers turns to the other and says, 'How did you cut down more trees than me when you had lunch and I didn't have lunch?' And he says, 'Well, I had lunch and then I sharpened my saw. That is why I cut down more trees.' I always feel that that is a good piece of advice. When you feel you're not doing much, maybe you're just sharpening your saw – it's fine to take a break now and again.

1. Helen Levitt (1913-2009) was a Brooklyn-born photographer and filmmaker whose lyrical and incisive work captured the essence of New York's streets. Her career took off in the mid-1930s thanks to her striking work in the city's poorer neighbourhoods, and in 1939, one of her images was selected for the inaugural photography exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, where she also had her first solo show, *Photographs of Children*, in 1943. She spent much of the 1940s editing films and directing documentaries, before returning to photography to continue her decades-long search 'for something that catches my eye'.

2. The photograph was taken by Cecil Beaton at the bombed Middle Temple in London for a 1941 *Vogue* story called 'Fashion Is Indestructible'. Another image in the series, featuring the same model in the same suit standing in a dark passageway, is widely and erroneously credited to Lee Miller.

3. In an article titled 'Is there a prize for the stupidest outfit at Men's Fashion Week in London…?', published on January 9, 2013 and accompanied by a cartoon of an elderly man wearing a mankini, the *Daily Mail* wrote: 'At J.W. [sic] Anderson the humiliation of the models was made truly complete, as the designer sent out his clan of put-upon male beauties wearing frilly shorts, leather dresses and frill-trimmed knee-length boots. One blond looked so down in the dumps it's a wonder he didn't tear the offending garment off and run for the hills. Then again, in those shoes, he would have had a job.'

4. Joseph Beuys' room-sized installation *Plight* was originally created for Anthony d'Offay Gallery in London in 1985. It consists of 284 rolls of felt, a grand piano, a blackboard and a medical thermometer.

5. The 'Interpretation' shoot was published in the July 1997 issue of *Vogue Italia*.

6. Tadashi Yanai founded Uniqlo in Hiroshima in 1984 and now heads its parent company, Fast Retailing, which also includes brands such as Theory and Comptoir des Cotonniers.

7. *Disobedient Bodies*, which ran 18 March-18 June 2017, included sculptures by artists including Jean Arp, Louise Bourgeois, Barbara Hepworth and Dorothea Tanning and fashion from designers such as Rei Kawakubo, Helmut Lang and Issey Miyake.

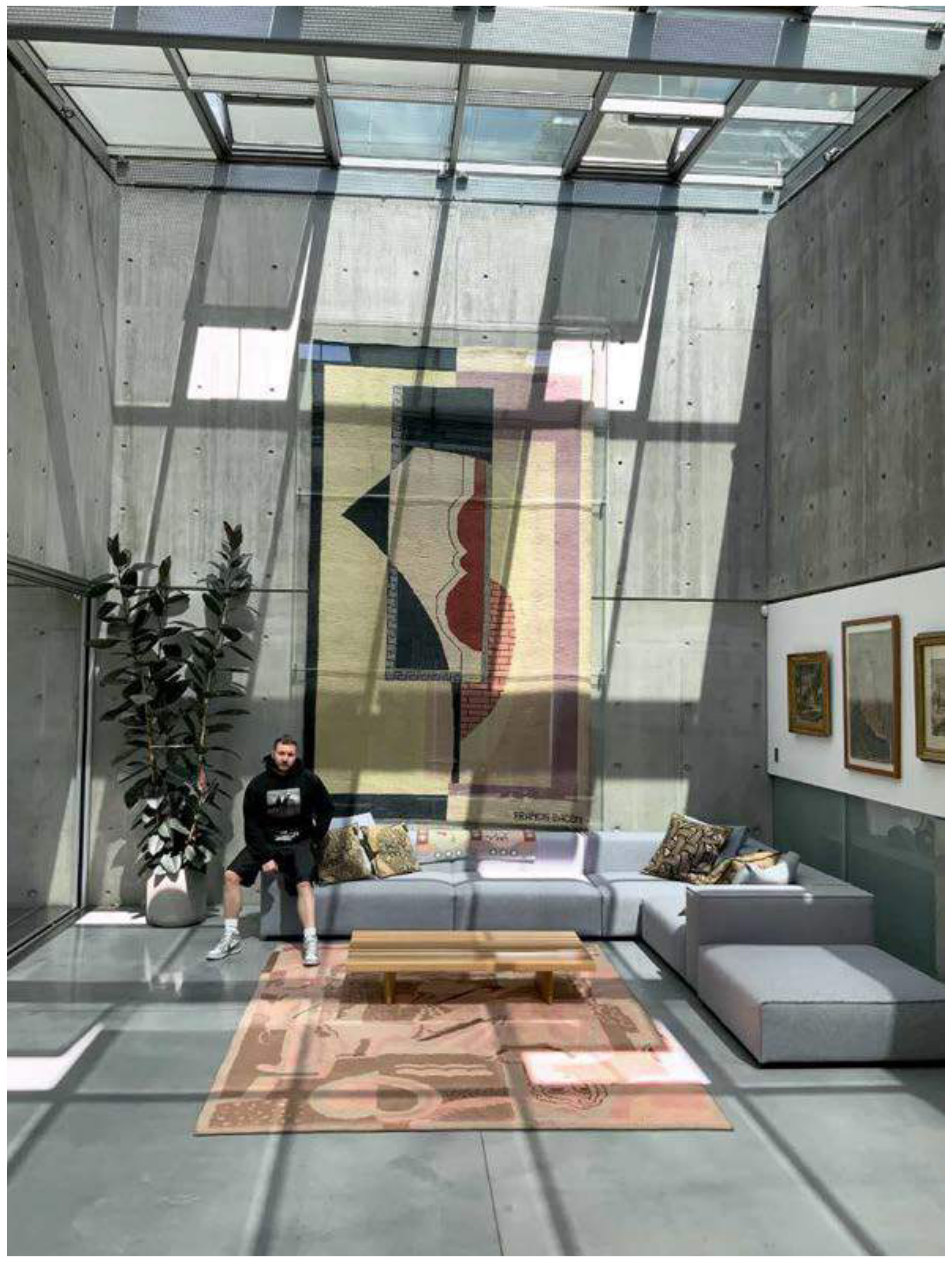
8. *Chance Encounters* is an exhibition held annually at the Loewe store in Miami since 2015; the most recent show featured work by Anne Low, Andrea Buttner and Ian Godfrey.

9. The Loewe store at 35 Passeig de Gràcia is in a building designed by Lluis Domènech i Montaner (1850-1923), a key member of the Modernisme Català movement, which also included fellow architect Antoni Gaudí.

10. Francisco de Zurbarán's *Agnus Dei*, a still life of a trussed lamb painted in 1640, is in the Prado Museum, Madrid.

Victoria Beckham and Kim Jones

Moderated by Tim Blanks



‘It’s so obvious that what we need right now is collaboration and not competition.’

Victoria Beckham and Kim Jones in conversation, 22 May 2020. Moderated by Tim Blanks.

Victoria Beckham: Where is everybody currently situated?

Kim Jones: I’m in London, in Notting Hill.

Tim Blanks: I’m in Maida Vale.

Victoria: We’re in Oxfordshire. We got back from Miami and then came straight here and haven’t left the house, except we’ve been going for really lovely walks and the weather has been incredible.

Kim: I haven’t really been out that much, but I’ve got the pool and I’ve got the gym, an outdoor terrace and a garden. I’ve been keeping to myself and I quite enjoy it.

Tim: Kim, I always think of you as someone who is furiously on the go; you’re just hither and yon all the time. How hard has it been to slow down and fall into a completely different kind of rhythm?

Kim: Not at all actually. I got my house last summer and I haven’t spent much time in it, so I’ve been organizing every drawer and every box in my storeroom. You know when I’m not working, I’ve been doing stuff that’s purposeful. But then I’m also not afraid to go to bed at nine at night and watch TV in bed and just read. I’ve enjoyed it; I’m not going to lie. I mean, my dad dying was a really horrible thing in this isolation and that was quite a weird thing to deal with, but apart from that, the rest of it has been quite nice.

Tim: Do you think you’ll be changed when you come out of it?

Kim: I don’t know if I will be changed because human beings adapt so quickly. I mean the one thing I have found funny is that my sleep pattern has been quite erratic. One day I wake up with loads of energy and want to do tons of stuff; then the next day I’m kind of lethargic. Things change daily. Some people have become nocturnal but are getting lots of work done because it’s been so peaceful, while others have become early-morning people. You can suddenly relate to hostage situations, the way the human species adapts very quickly.

Tim: Have you been dreaming a lot? This is one of the interesting things in this crisis.

‘I was lucky enough to have people like Lee McQueen supporting me as I was coming up, so I want to be able to help people in the same way.’

Kim: I’ve had some real horror dreams and then some really fun ones that I don’t want to wake up from.

Victoria: I am always quite a dreamer. I dream a lot, but I don’t remember them apart from when I immediately wake up or something happens during the day that takes me back. Like Kim said, I’ve actually been quite nocturnal, which is strange for me. When we first went into lockdown with our three younger children, David and I spoke about it and we decided there was a lot of work and pressure on the children to do online schooling, and little people feel the stress as well. So mine and David’s approach was, yes, the kids have to do their work, but if they need a break or a change of scenery, then that is OK as well. They just need to feel loved and cared for; they need to smile and to laugh. That is the most important thing. They will catch up; we don’t worry about that too much. We are staying up quite late, watching movies as a family, doing a lot of cooking together. It’s been quite nice being able to relax and enjoy each other’s company, eat late, unload the dishwasher, do normal stuff together. We have really missed Brooklyn because he’s been in America with his girlfriend, so we haven’t seen him for about 11 weeks now.

Tim: What do you think the kids are picking up from this? Any insights into what is happening all around them?

Victoria: We have tried to protect them. It’s been so confusing for all of us, what we hear on the radio, what we read, what we see on the television. So we talk about it as a family, what the future looks like. Hopefully they will come out of lockdown and say they’ve enjoyed the family time. We’ve been on lots of walks, lots of bike rides together. We are so lucky to have a garden that they can play football in. Normally they don’t always have the time to do that.

Tim: I love the idea of you all cooking and dancing and doing the dishes, it sounds like *The Big Chill*.[1]

Victoria: I have to say to say it’s been great, and David is a really great cook.

Tim: What’s he been making?

Victoria: He does really great stuff, pasta… he did chicken Kiev the other night.[2] He does quite complicated meals, but he is a very good cook. He went to culinary school when he was in Italy playing for AC Milan, so he’s quite the chef.

Kim: Does he use recipes, or has he got things he knows?

Victoria: A bit of both.

Kim: Does he get Gordon [Ramsay] on the phone?

Victoria: He does have Gordon on the phone actually! We have an Aga here in the countryside, and he was making lemon drizzle cake. And he was really perplexed as to why it was dipping in the middle. My suggestion was that the air doesn't circulate in an Aga quite as it would in a fan-assisted oven. So David did phone Gordon one day and he was like, 'What the hell? My lemon drizzle cake keeps damn well collapsing.'

Tim: David and Kim should get a stall at your next village fete. I've heard that Kim is making Victoria sponges to a *British Bake Off* standard.[3]

Victoria: I didn't know you cooked, Kim.

Kim: I suddenly wanted to make a cake. I did it and I surprised myself, so I've been doing a few actually. I'm going to do a tagine this evening. It's nice having time to actually do things.

'Maybe people will remember what fashion used to be: people made it because they loved making it and people wore fashion because they loved wearing it.'

Victoria: Now you're both coming out of lockdown, are you buff or not buff because you've been eating all your cakes?

Kim: I haven't been eating the cakes; I've lost weight actually.

Victoria: Oh! How have you done that?

Kim: Well, I've been swimming every day and just being really strict about what I'm eating.

Tim: Victoria, you know me, buff and Blanks don't go together.

Kim: But you've got your gorgeous curly locks, Tim.

Tim: My hair is now a foot high. What's yours looking like at the moment?

Victoria: Mine? Mine is probably like everybody else's, it's a little *unkempt*, shall we say? It is quite nice not having to worry about that sort of thing. Normally, I like to make a bit of an effort when I go to work. But it's been nice not having to do that. I mean, I'll wear a little bit of make-up around the house, but it's very different.

Kim: I have to say, just being able to get up and do stuff is really nice, not having that structure that otherwise there is every day. Normally when we have time off it's like planned time off: we'll do this, see those people, have dinner here, lunch there. So I am embracing it – I *can't* do anything; it is something completely out of my control.

Victoria: I agree. When we first went into lockdown, we were going on walks in the country and the number of little animals and deer that we saw seemed quite unusual for the time of year. I said to David, 'It feels like we're in *Jumanji*, like, what is happening?!'[4] All of a sudden there are animals everywhere and you are really *noticing* it. I don't know if they are normally there or if it is strange for this time of the year, but it has definitely given us time to think about how beautiful nature is.

Tim: What have you missed the most?

Kim: I don't know, I haven't really been speaking to people that much. I have been messaging people, but I don't feel like I have that much to say. With things like Instagram, you see what people are up to.

Victoria: To be honest, I haven't missed anything. It's been a real luxury to just be around David and the kids, because he normally travels so much with work. I am looking forward to getting back to work, though. I have been doing all of our meetings in a very different way, but it's now reached a stage where we have deadlines, and we have the pre-collection coming up. Kim, I noticed that you've set up a little studio in your house. I don't have that and so I am now looking forward to getting back into the atelier and getting my hands on the next collection. It'll be in a very different way with the team, what with social distancing. I am looking forward to that. But I haven't missed anything, other than my dad's birthday.

Kim: And yours!

Victoria: Yeah, it was my birthday and it was the sweetest thing: Fat Tony, who I just adore, did a virtual party for me, which was great, and we raised money for a children's charity. It would be nice to see friends and go for dinner…

Kim: I miss my friends; I don't miss travelling though. I haven't *not* been on a plane for two and a half months in over 15 years, so I'm really appreciating being in one place. I'll tell you one thing though – time goes so fast! It's like it's Friday already.

Tim: I do my walk, I have my breakfast, I read the newspaper, and suddenly it's tequila time already, and it's like, 'What the hell happened?'

Victoria: That was my next question, what has everybody's beverage been during lockdown? And what time is it acceptable to start drinking? Let's start with you, Tim, because I bet I know what your answer's going to be.

Tim: I have obviously been drinking my Casamigos. I upgraded from Reposado to Anejo. And then I found it getting quite heavy, so I've been drinking quite a lot of wine. Too much, actually. I know a lot of people have stopped drinking, but I enjoy it, so what the hell?

Kim: Alcohol sales have gone up like 30% in the UK. I haven't drunk that much, maybe four times. I'm not really a drinker; I don't enjoy it so much. I like it in a social setting, but I'm allergic to most alcohols, so it has to be a special occasion.

Victoria: I go through spells where I will stop drinking for three to six months, but I have to say, I enjoy it. I have been making the most of this time, to sit down with David, drink red wine or a vodka and tonic. I like some Don Julio, too.[5] So yes, I have been drinking and I look forward to it, especially as the weather has been so lovely.

Kim: My last tequila incident was with you, Victoria, and I had to be carried home by my other half because my body couldn't take it!

'I don't want to see independent brands or young designers being crippled by this, because a diversity of different points of view is both vital and exciting.'

Tim: And I think you reintroduced me to tequila at a Christmas party at Natalie Massenet's. It's been downhill ever since, or uphill, whichever way you want to look at it. I didn't realize it was so easy to have the alcohol of your choice delivered. I found one place that has dozens of tequilas. I think if the lockdown went on for another three or four years, I could probably sample them all.

Victoria: You got to enjoy it, come on!

Kim: I'll probably have a drink tonight because I've got the terrace and it's Friday and it's lovely weather, everything is quiet. It's enjoyable.

Tim: You said you were making a tagine. That's slow food, isn't it? How do you feel about slow fashion? A lot of people have been talking about how this virus arrived at a time when fashion really needed to take a long hard look at the way it was operating. Sustainability wasn't only an issue that applied to fashion's relation with nature, it also related to people sustaining themselves in the industry. Are you coming out of this crisis with a different perspective on issues like that?

Kim: This slowing-down thing, I don't know how much will happen in terms of my company. I am in a large luxury conglomerate and have the support there, but it's a tough, tough world now for independent and young designers. I would rather see them doing two really amazing collections a year that they do in four drops for big stores, so they are not overexerting themselves and overstretching themselves. Helping the clothes stay a long time in the store, I think is key. That is the way to support young designers.

Victoria: In fashion, it's more difficult when you are a smaller company. It has been good to have this time to look at my business model and think about what it might look like in the future. Things have to change. There are so many collections; there is so much waste. My collections are small, but do we really need four a year? It has been good to have the time to really reflect, speak with my shareholders, speak with my CEO, look at different strategies, different opportunities. Kim, what do you think is going to happen?

Kim: My primary interest is independent people and the young designers, knowing things are self-funded. I don't want to see them being crippled by this because a diversity of different points of view is so exciting. There is a lot of negativity towards fashion at the moment, but all these young brands are working hard on sustainability and small, local networks. It is like they were trained to become the future.

Tim: What we've done at the Business of Fashion is facilitate an initiative called 'Rewiring Fashion', to support independent designers and independent retailers. So far we have had more than 1,600 signatories and what has really impressed me with the whole thing is how exciting it was for them to all be together and talking for the first time. You realized how the industry really doesn't foster that kind of community because the conventional notion of the fashion designer is this solo creator. Except that right now, it's so obvious that what we need is collaboration and not competition. With all these people talking to each other, you can see the germ of something. They are going to support each other through this crisis.

Victoria: I have never been in a position where I can fly people to the other side of the world to look at a pre-collection or do these incredible sets. I have seen David watching you in Tokyo and in Miami and thought, 'Wow, that must be incredible.' Kim, do you think that will come back?

Kim: I think it will. After all this happens, we'll be back because we have this drive to be back. I am very aware that what we have is a very different thing. We don't really sell to retailers; we have our own network. But I want to help by talking to retailers I respect, who can still buy these independent designers. I had people like Lee McQueen supporting me as I was coming up, so I want to be able to do that same thing. It's about having that facility to bounce back. I'm watching and listening, more than saying what I want to do at the moment. I hope that I can help people in the same way that I was helped.

Tim: But there is something else that is even more fundamental than any of this. The most important person in the fashion cycle is the customer. What are they are going to be looking for as this situation evolves? What are people going to want from fashion?

Victoria: At the moment, we're all scratching our heads, thinking about the customer and the community. A few weeks ago, I thought maybe when everyone gets out of lockdown, they are going to want to put on some nice clothes and get out, because maybe they've been wearing stretchy leggings and elasticated waist trousers, just hanging around the house. Maybe people will want to dress up a bit more, but I don't know. So many livelihoods and businesses have been so affected by what has happened. Are people even going to have the resources to spend on new clothes? I feel that so much is going to change and while it is great to have the time to think about it, it is also quite tormenting, because who knows?

'My last tequila incident was with you, Victoria, and I had to be carried home by my other half because my body couldn't take it!'

Kim: I am very much about waiting and watching. I ask every day what is going on at work with sales and so on. China has opened up and it's been very successful. It's like people do want to carry on as normal after this, because people do tend to suppress things that are traumatic. For some people who have found this really hard, they will just want to bounce back to normal, but lots of people won't be able to.

Victoria: You are lucky in that you have lots of your own stores, but my business relies heavily on wholesale accounts and they are really struggling. I mean, how many of the big stores have filed for bankruptcy? It's so sad, isn't it?

Tim: Designers will have to reconcile themselves to a lot of shrinkage in their businesses. They will have to remind themselves of why they do what they do, why they love what they do. At the root of it all is your relationship with your customer, that intimacy, trust and loyalty that has been eroded by what has been happening in the industry for the past while. The giantism has taken a lot of the humanity out of it. Maybe this will be a moment when people remember what fashion used to be: people made it because they loved making it and people wore fashion because they loved wearing it – and that relationship was fundamental. Maybe I'm living in a fool's paradise, but that kind of relationship could be refreshed by this situation. If people stopped going out into the world thinking, 'I'm going to be a billion-dollar business', but instead simply thought about why they love what they do and who they do it for.

Victoria: That's something that I'm really excited about, this idea of simplifying things again. I'm tiny in comparison to Kim, but when I started it was about doing little presentations and it was 10 dresses and so much love and the passion went into it, and it was fun. Then all of a sudden, we were doing things the same way as everyone else and then came the pre-collection and the bigger collections and the bigger shows, and there is nothing wrong with that, but I almost felt in September that I can't compete in an environment where people have such enormous budgets to create such big shows and such big pre-collections. Maybe one day I will be in a position to do that, but I'm actually quite excited by the fact it might feel like a more even playing field when we come back. Even if you are in a position to do these things, it probably won't be appropriate or even possible, because people can't travel as much anyway. So everyone is going to have to make things smaller. And that will rely on the creativity of the actual product.

Tim: Make fashion rational again.

Kim: I am experienced enough to know what things people want at certain times of the year. I look, I listen, and I talk to people. Listening is such an important part of the job, and I think that is probably why I have been successful. I like to process the information and then think about it and then do it. I tell people off if they are working too fast; I say, 'You can't do that, that's not how it's going to be.' It's amazing how people keep on panicking and then messing up.

Victoria: Kim, if you don't have the pressure of the show, do you think that will reflect creatively in the collections? When you take that pressure away, surely that will ultimately result in clothes that are more wearable, no? I feel that way. I love my shows, but I also know that I wear more of my pre-collections.

Kim: I always look at the clothes as being wearable and then we inject special pieces for certain people. The last show we did in Paris, I think those clothes really needed to be seen in real life.

Tim: Victoria, are you exploring other technologies to get your message across?

Victoria: Digital is something that has interested me right from the beginning. Selling direct has always been very important and I have been looking at exploring that with other digital options, but I'm not in a position to do it right now, because it is very expensive in the way I want to do it and the execution is key.

Tim: Think about when vaudeville turned into silent movies and silent movies turned into talkies and talkies turned into television and so on and so forth, there were all these big leaps. There are so many people exploring alternatives to the way things were being done. If you break the tyranny of the fashion calendar and you find technologies that express what you want to show or tell people, there isn't any reason why they shouldn't just be available all the time, so there is an ongoing dialogue between you and everyone else in the world.

Victoria: I would love to do that, and I think that hopefully that is something in the future I will be in a position to do.

Kim: I think we just all have to wait. I think there will be some very good things coming out of this. It's just how we get back to normality. We have been really strict in lockdown and then you see people going out and protesting against it, and then prolonging it. It's a bit of a mess.

Tim: That has been a depressing thing, seeing this disease that affects everyone becoming so polarized by politics.

Kim: I don't like talking about politics when I'm talking about work because it gets too depressing. It just shows you how people have still got a lot to learn.

Tim: But nature is always willing to teach us.

Kim: I think that's a good note to end on.

Tim: Let's go and have a tequila right now.

Victoria: Oh Kim, when I did the picture the other day with Juergen, it was the best photo shoot I have ever done. I blow-dried my own hair and did my own make-up, which took 20 minutes to do, then I picked up the laptop and Juergen said just go and stand outside in the garden. So I went outside in the garden and the wind blew my hair completely over my face and he was like, 'That's great! We've got a great picture.' Honestly, I kid you not! It took two and a half minutes to get that shot. Normally you would give a whole day to do a shoot.

Kim: He sent me the picture – and you look like a movie star.

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1. Written and directed by legendary Hollywood screenwriter Lawrence Kasdan, *The Big Chill* (1983) depicts a group of friends who reunite for a weekend at a country house 15 years after they left college. The film and its story of baby boomers facing up to adulthood was arguably eclipsed by its immaculate Motown and rock soundtrack, which sold 6 million copies in the US alone.

2. Originally a Russian dish of possibly French origin renowned as the signature dish of a Kiev hotel at the end of the 19th century, the chicken Kiev became a British instituation in 1979 after it became the first ever ready meal sold by retailer Marks & Spencer. The dish – a pounded chicken breast filled with garlic butter and coated in breadcrumbs – is so popular that in 2006 it was added to the basket of goods used by the UK Office of National Statistics to track living costs.

3. *The Great British Bake Off*, also known as *Bake Off*, or even *GBBO*, is an annual television cooking competition first screened in 2010 on the BBC. Replacing the usual reality-TV formula of vicious conflict with sweet-natured (yet fierce) competition and the love of baked goods, the show is now a national institution.

4. *Jumanji* (1995) combined a supernatural board game, large numbers of rampaging CGI animals, and Robin Williams as a fantasy father figure in search of his lost youth, all to great box-office success. Two sequels followed, which updated the board game to a video game; the first, released in 2017 and starring Dwayne Johnson, was called an 'amiable effort' by UK newspaper the *Guardian*.

5. Established in 1942, Don Julio produces luxury tequilas for the international market. In October 2019, the Mexican brand collaborated with Sotheby's to stage an exhibition of 12 works by Andy Warhol at Victoria Beckham's flagship store in Dover Street, London.

Tommy Hilfiger and Telfar Clemens

‘When I was younger, I wanted
a really tight Tommy Hilfiger T-shirt
to show off my belly button.’

Tommy Hilfiger and Telfar Clemens
in conversation, 14 May 2020.

Telfar Clemens: Hey, Tommy. Nice to finally meet you. I’m such a huge fan.

Tommy Hilfiger: Nice to finally meet you, too. I love what you’re doing. I love when you piece and patch all that cool stuff together, and I love those bags you’re doing. How many people are on your team?

Telfar: About six of us. We’re a really small team.

Tommy: How are you getting on selling on e-commerce?

Telfar: Luckily, we already began the year shifting our energy towards working on our e-commerce, to make that our main focus, and right now of course that is the thing that everyone is forced to rely on, so we are in a good place. We planned about a year ahead to skip Spring/Summer 2021 and make this big shift towards a different way of doing business. We were *really* lucky, because that took wholesale out of our P & L, even though it was growing really well. We’ve really wanted to focus on reaching the people who matter to the brand, which isn’t necessarily fashion people. We have a whole community outside of the world of fashion.

‘I jumped when I saw that you had DM-ed us on Instagram, and I was, like, ‘Wait, shit, is this actually the real fucking Tommy Hilfiger?’’

Tommy: Which stores are you in?

Telfar: We sell at a lot of stores. In New York, our main stores are Opening Ceremony and Dover Street Market. In Paris, it’s Galeries Lafayette, and a lot of the new stores there.

Tommy: But no Neiman’s or Saks?

Telfar: No. We have Browns in London, though. The big department stores have been courting us for years, and the ones that we do deal with, we do well in. But we are a different kind of brand from where retail is right now. Like, I really want to be independent.

Tommy: …and you don’t want to sell at discount prices, anyway, and all the department stores will slash the prices.

Telfar: Our stuff is already kind of discounted. I have never wanted people to think that the price is what makes the garment what it is. I’m a Century 21 kind of person, to be honest: I got my entire fashion education from going to the European fashion designer section at Century 21, opening things up, trying them on, buying them, turning them inside out, returning them. That is how I learned about fashion, just by seeing everything all together. I think of it all as one thing. I don’t really think that fashion needs to be expensive. That’s the thing with me – I am inspired by the most ubiquitous things, from Old Navy to Comme des Garçons.

Tommy: How much are your bags? Those totes with that cool logo?

Telfar: There are three different sizes and the smallest one starts at $120; the biggest is $280.

Tommy: Wow, that’s a good price. The logo is really awesome. Is it embossed?

Telfar: It’s a debossed logo. The T and the C are for Telfar Clemens. My teacher made the logo for me when I was in kindergarten. He was such a cool teacher. I put that on all my designs.

Tommy: What are we going to talk about today?

Telfar: We were really inspired by the story of how you started, with the George Lois billboard in Times Square.

Tommy: OK, I can tell you that story.

Telfar: I would love to hear it, because we followed that narrative when we presented Telfar as a big-bucks-celebrity designer, when it was actually just the two of us – myself and Babak [Radboy, Telfar’s creative director]. To know that there was that precedent was pretty amazing for us.

Tommy: In 1985, I was thinking about doing some advertising, but I didn’t really have any money to do it. This Indian guy who was backing me, Mohan Murjani, introduced me to [legendary art director] George Lois. George hadn’t really done any fashion advertising prior to that, and I explained to him that I was always looking at Calvin Klein and Ralph Lauren ads, and maybe I’d want to put a model on a beach and, you know, photograph him with his hair blowing in the wind or with his shirt untucked. And he just looked at me and said, ‘That is bullshit! You don’t want to do that.’ And I was, like, ‘OK, why not?’ And he said, ‘Because *everyone* else is doing that.’ He told me to give him a couple of days and he went back to his studio. When he came back, he brought boards with ads plastered on them – Giorgio Armani ads, Calvin Klein ads, Ralph Lauren, Donna Karan, Perry Ellis – but he’d removed the names from all the ad images. He then started asking people in the room, ‘Could you identify these ads?’ They were saying that the Ralph Lauren ad, shot in black-and-white by Bruce Weber, was the Calvin Klein ad, because the Calvin Klein ad was also shot by Bruce Weber in black-and-white, and it also had horses in the background. And then Giorgio Armani looked like Donna Karan… Basically, *everybody* looked the same.

Telfar: That’s so true.

Tommy: Then he pulled out a new board that said: ‘The 4 great American designers for men are: R____L_____, P____ E____, C_____ K ____, …and T ____ H _______. This is the logo of the least-known of the four, but he’s the next big American designer.’ And I just said, ‘Fuck, you can’t do that!’ And he said, ‘Yes, you can. It’s legal.’ And I was, like, ‘Yes, but people are going to think I’m crazy. These guys are big established designers, I can’t do that.’ And he looked at me and said, ‘Well, OK, if you do what you say you want to do – just photograph a model on the beach – you’re going to need about 20 years and millions of dollars to break through.’ He kept saying that you have to disrupt the marketplace so that people will remember your name, know who you are, and will talk about you everywhere.

Telfar: What did you understand he meant by the word everywhere?

Tommy: *Everywhere*! Like, we would become the water-cooler conversation, the dinner-party conversation, the cocktail-party conversation, even conversations over bongs… *Everything*! I said, ‘OK, I’ve got nothing to lose, let’s go for it.’ So we bought a Times Square billboard and that was it, that was the establishing of Tommy Hilfiger, the brand and the flag.[1] Nobody knew me before then, but *everyone* was suddenly talking about it, saying that’s crazy, how could he do this, who does this kid think he is? He’s not a fashion designer; he didn’t go to design school; he’ll be out of business in six months, blah, blah, blah. But it worked in establishing the name, shoulder to shoulder with some of the biggest names in fashion at the time.

Telfar: Were people pissed at you? Like your peers?

Tommy: Very! They *hated* it. They might still hate me, I don’t know. I don’t really care.

Telfar: Oh my God!

Tommy: My clothes were an alternative to Ralph Lauren and the other clothes out there, because I wanted to make preppy classics cool. I started using a lot of athletic influences: oversize jerseys, hockey jerseys, football jerseys, putting big numbers and a big logo… And all the hip-hop kids started wearing the big logos on the streets, and they would wear my jeans, like, 10 sizes too big.

Telfar: Yeah, of course.

Tommy: And then I met Snoop. He wore one of the rugby jerseys on *Saturday Night Live* [on 19 March 1994], and people went *crazy*. And then Puffy and Russell Simmons and everybody started wearing the clothes, and that’s when the business *really* blew up. I still held onto the preppy all-American look, which was the mainstay of the business: the basics.

‘I met Snoop, he wore one of the rugby jerseys on *Saturday Night Live*, and people went crazy. Then Puffy started wearing us, and the business blew up!’

Telfar: I really love that every single person could wear it and it matched their personality. And they are still wearing it…

Tommy: Men, women, children, all different backgrounds, all different sizes. And everyone wears it in a totally different way.

Telfar: That definitely strikes a chord with us. With us, there is an avant-garde strain, but the things we are deconstructing are the commonest things possible. That is the communication that we want to have.

Tommy: I think it is genius, by the way. You saw out of the box: the deconstructing and the reconstructing of all of the cool essentials and basics, workwear and athletic wear. Honestly, if I had to do it all again, I would do the same thing you guys are doing.

Telfar: That’s so cool to hear. When I was younger, I wanted a really tight Tommy Hilfiger T-shirt to show off my belly button, but I’d have to go to the women’s section to get that look. Today, my take with my brand is that things are just for people; we’re erasing where it comes from or who is supposed to wear it. It’s just letting people find what they want and appreciate what they like.

Tommy: Before I started Tommy Hilfiger, when I was 18 years old, I opened my first shop. It was called People’s Place, and all the clothes were for ‘the people’. Everything was for everybody. This was 1969, and I had People’s Place throughout the 1970s. It was a time when everything was for everybody: bell-bottoms and midriff tops… A lot of the rock stars started wearing glam, and it was all inspired by that movement.

Telfar: That is amazing. So it was based on size and style. Where was this?

Tommy: I opened my first one in my hometown of Elmira, New York, which is in the middle of New York state. Then I opened more stores on college campuses. I was selling to college students all this cool stuff that I would find in little shops in the Village, in SoHo, in St Mark's Place. I would bring it all back upstate to resell to my customers.

Telfar: You were like a vintage dealer, a designer, a fashion dude.

Tommy: I guess you could say that.

Telfar: Growing up, shopping for clothes was my one freedom. That was my principal motivation, and the same motivation for choosing my college in New York, which was down near the Fashion District. When I was growing up, there was this whole rumour going around that you didn't want black people wearing your clothes. Talking to you now, and seeing how that was such a core part of launching your business, I just think that what you've done is super cool and inspiring.

Tommy: The person who started that rumour must have been a competitor, but we never found out who. The rumour said I was on Oprah when I said that. But when Oprah heard the rumour, she was like, 'What? He was never even on the show!' So she called me and said, 'Come on the show, I want you to quash the rumour.'

Telfar: You knew Oprah?

Tommy: We knew each other through Quincy Jones, who's a very good friend of mine. And Oprah was, like, 'There is *no* way he said that. He was not even on the show.' There are still stupid people out there today who believe it, but it is so far from the truth.

Telfar: I mean, looking back, your fashion shows and campaigns featured all my favourite artists, like Aaliyah…

Tommy: Exactly. I just think there was somebody jealous or vindictive who wanted to put me out of business by making up that rumour. I mean, the part of culture that drove my business came from the streets and from my love for music, from the fashion to the clubs to who is up-and-coming. More than anything, it just hurt my heart to hear that.

> **'I think what you're doing at Telfar is genius, by the way. Honestly, if I had to do Tommy all again, I would do the same thing you guys are doing.'**

Telfar: It is really cool to hear the back story of that whole thing. It's important to hear, because there is so much misrepresentation in the fashion industry, and so many people trying to be something they are not. Especially now, when things are *expected* to be inclusive, but it's often just token. To hear how you've genuinely been inclusive is really cool.

Tommy: Even from the early days, when I started doing ads in magazines, I wanted people who were not just models; I wanted Aaliyah, musicians, real people. Beyoncé was my first fragrance face. I met her when she was 16 and I was doing a fashion show at Macy's. The DJ had cancelled, so my brother Andy came up to me and said, 'Tommy, there are these three girls who have a group, they dress just like Aaliyah, and they could perform during the show.' I was like, 'OK, bring them on stage, let them perform.' I turned around and asked, 'Who's the one in the middle? She's got a great voice and a great look.' And Andy said, 'Oh, her name's Beyoncé.' That was before Destiny's Child was even known. It's crazy.

Telfar: Wow, that's amazing. What are you up to right now in the midst of all this quarantine?

Tommy: I am trying to figure out what the next step is, because I don't want to go back to what we were doing before. We already did the big, see-now-buy-now fashion shows. We moved into digital media and entertainment for the shows, because we wanted them to be a big spectacle where people could actually buy 'off the runway'. We are now trying to figure out livestream shopping, because I think it is going to be really big.

Telfar: Like a shopping network?

Tommy: Yes, I definitely want to do that. Every day I think about that and I'm trying to get my team to think way ahead. When I'm not doing that, I go hiking in the morning or biking. I play some tennis. I hang out with my kids. I have seven children. My son is a musician in LA; you should go online and look him up: Ricky Hil. Then my daughter has a collection called Foo and Foo; she is in Dover Street Market, too. Then I have another daughter in LA – she's married to an artist – and I have kids who are autistic, and then I have some younger kids.

Telfar: You've got a full house going on. Are you guys all quarantining together?

Tommy: My older kids are in LA and we're quarantining in Mustique with the younger kids. What about you? Are you living in Brooklyn?

Telfar: No, right now I'm in the East Village. I'm staying in Babak's apartment while this is all going on, but I usually live in Queens. Basically, in January we did Pitti Uomo, which was our last show for 2020, and since then we've decided to work on new projects, focus on the business and find new ways to express our work. Film and entertainment, like you said, is such a big interest to me right now. I have made a video for every single collection I have done, and that's been a big part of drawing people into my world and displaying my work. Right now, I really want to focus on that channel, too, exactly as you said.

Tommy: That's very cool. I love it.

Telfar: Last season, for our show in Paris, we started to make a movie. It is a movie in a really loose sense, part reality, part scripted. I want to explore all these different avenues and try to create things that work for us and things that actually display what is going on right now. But, tell me, what do you dislike about fashion right now?

Tommy: What do I *dislike*? I dislike snobbism. I hate it. I also think a lot of the luxury brands are ripping people off, because their price points are way too expensive.

Telfar: One of my qualms with 'street fashion' or 'high-end fashion', is the fact that the place it is coming from or the person that it is referencing, isn't even allowed to be in its presence! It's a big problem for me.

Tommy: Yes, I agree. It is so inauthentic.

Telfar: I don't like things that are overpriced for no reason, that are based on an idea of 'luxury' that isn't grounded in anything: like department stores lines with cashmere sweaters that cost thousands of dollars simply because they're from that particular department store. The other thing I don't particularly like is the phenomenon of celebrity designers; people who say they do a thing that actually *isn't* a thing. You know, you show up to the reality show and you see the clothes, but there's no feeling behind it.

Tommy: I think that era is over; that's probably a thing of the past.

Telfar: The fashion industry that I grew up in was so celebrity-driven. You needed to jump through so many hoops, besides just looking at the clothes.

Tommy: That's going to change; I think fashion has to become more real.

Telfar: The thing that has been fuelling our bag sales, almost making our Telfar bag an It bag, is the fact that the people who can afford to wear it are the people who actually wear it. We mirror-image our customer, basically. So, anyone who tags anything to our Instagram, gets reposted. It's almost like making the customer the celebrity, because everyone is a celebrity these days.

Tommy: I think that is really smart. You're thinking out of the box, but it's also realistic and authentic. That is why I have been watching you and I'm so impressed. I'm always like, who is new, who is relevant, who is making a difference? And when *System* asked me to do this interview with you, I was like, 'Wow, did you read my mind?' Because I have total respect for you and what you are doing.

Telfar: Oh, wow, thank you so much. That means a lot. I jumped when I saw that you had DM-ed us on Instagram, and I was, like, 'Wait, shit, is this the real fucking Tommy Hilfiger?' I have so much respect for everything you have done and the influence of that on how I view clothes. It's funny, because I have this picture of myself from seventh grade, when I wore a Tommy Hilfiger shirt every single day. That's how I picture myself at that age.

Tommy: Where did you go to school?

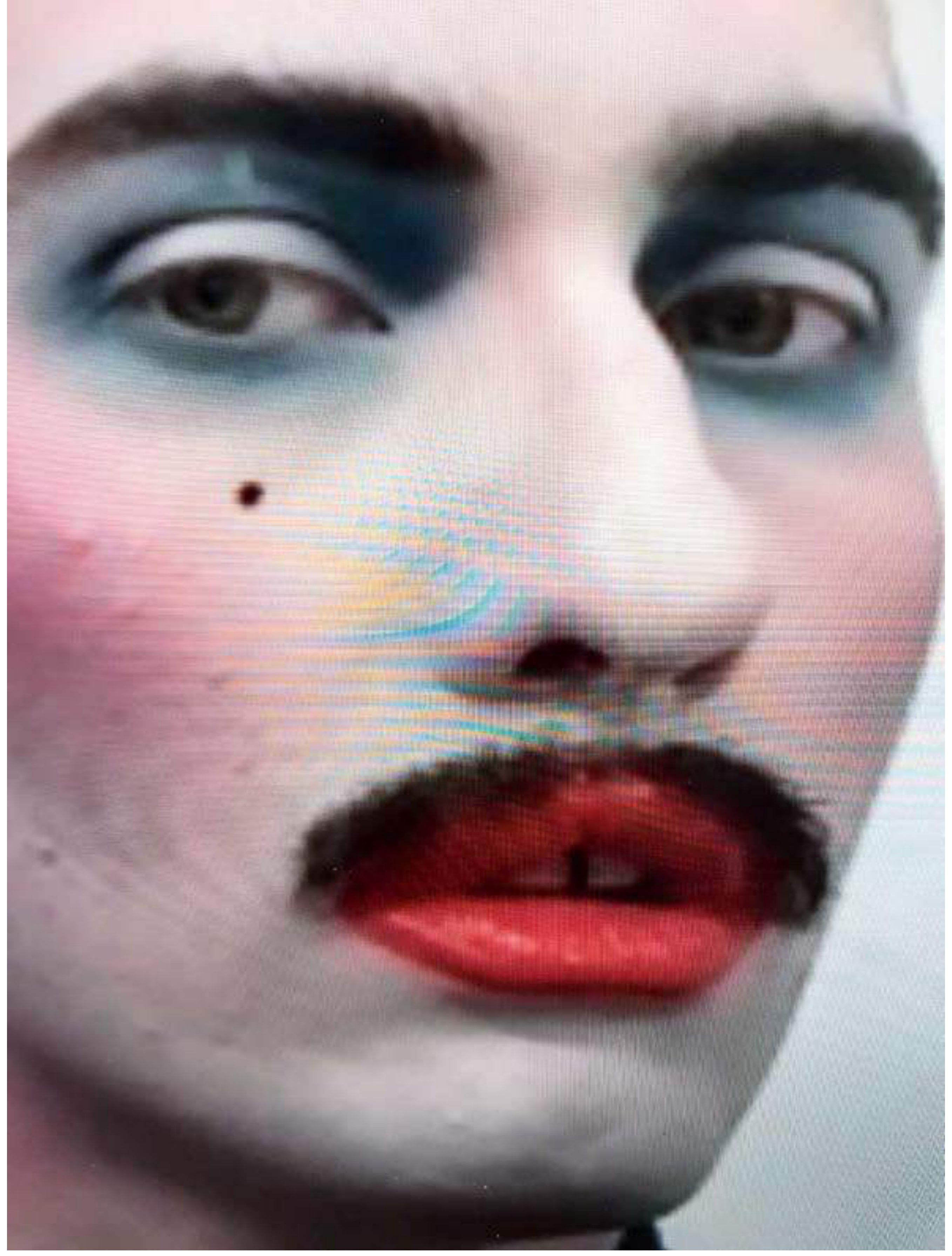
Telfar: I went to P.S. 206 in Queens, where I grew up. I'm Liberian-American, so I went to school a bit in Liberia, in Queens, Maryland, DC, Virginia, and then back in New York. So, I am mostly a New Yorker, but a little from the nation's capital.

Tommy: You've got experience from all over. You know, when we are both back in the city at the same time, I would really like to take you to my archives in Long Island. I have archives that go back over 40 years. I have to take you there; I think you would love it. And I think we should do something together.

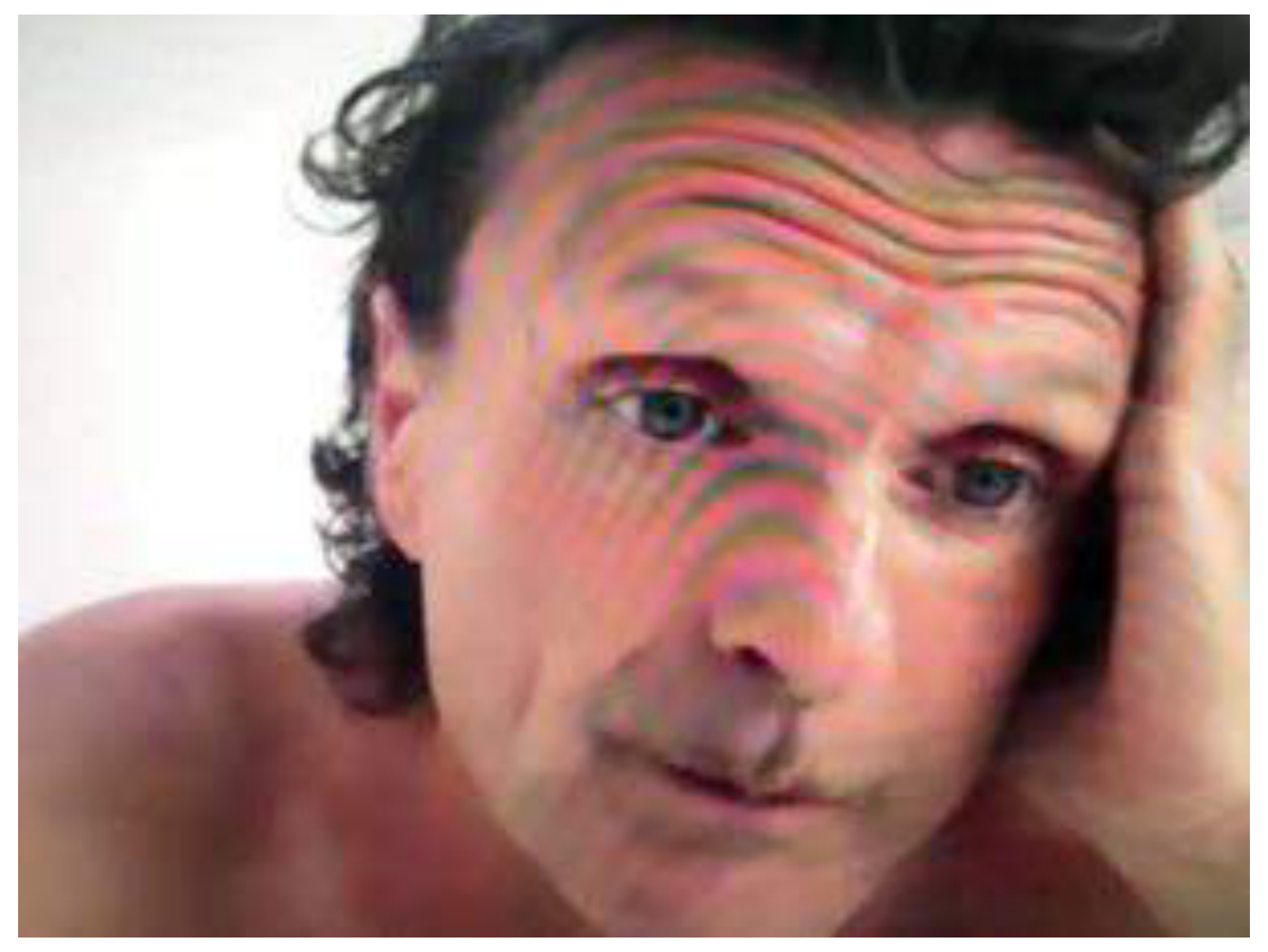
Telfar: I'm so down with that! I'm really happy to talk to you. Thanks for taking the time, and I hope we get to hang out super soon.

Tommy: Thanks. And congratulations on your success.

1.The billboard was unveiled in Times Square in September 1985, and the ad placed in 'every telephone booth in New York', according to one of Tommy Hilfiger's backers. The strategy did indeed prove controversial among fashion cognoscenti, outraged at Hilfiger's chutzpah. 'I give it a year,' Jack Hyde, head of menswear at the Fashion Institute of Technology, and a particularly virulent critic, told the *New York Times* on 18 March 1986. 'He's not a designer, he's a creation.' In response, George Lois says he simply rented another billboard, this time on Seventh Avenue, 'just to piss Calvin off'.



Charles Jeffrey and Jerry Stafford



**‘ I love going running because
that is the closest thing I get
to clubbing right now.’**

**Charles Jeffrey and Jerry Stafford
in conversation, 12 April 2020.**

Jerry Stafford: Hello, Charles!

Charles Jeffrey: Hi, Jerry! How are you doing?

Jerry: I’m fine. I’m in Biarritz. Where are you?

Charles: I’m at my boyfriend’s place next to Hackney Downs station. I have been in lockdown here for just over two weeks now. My studio at Somerset House is still open because it’s in a Grade I listed building[1] that can’t officially close; as long as there is security, we can go in. I’ve only been going if I really need to for e-commerce, but we are all working remotely.

‘London was so economically powerful and now that’s stripped away. You’re left with these empty buildings; just phallic sculptures that feel invalid.’

Jerry: So you’re not on your own?

Charles: I’m with my boyfriend, Julian; he is on the balcony, drawing. This is the longest that we’ve ever been in each other’s company, and it has been fine, even if there were a couple of times when we decided to have a day apart; that was very helpful.

Jerry: How do you feel when you wake up these days?

Charles: We’ve normalized it. We’re not over-questioning it. But I think the general emotion, the temperature, the pH level feels different. It’s more high-pitched, if that makes sense, higher frequency. I have never really liked working from home, the couple of times when I had to. I loved going to work at Hoi Polloi;[2] there is something about a familiar space and I would draw things for the collection or bash out a lot of the initial drawings in one sitting, from morning right through to evening. I would have my breakfast, lunch, and dinner there. I was a bit nervous about being at home, because I have never really gelled with the domestic space. You can be so easily distracted, knowing that you can just go and make a cup of tea. I feel a lot more under a microscope here. Have I exercised today? What have I eaten today? I’ve got scales right next to my desk!

Jerry: What was the first thing you did today?

Charles: I was supposed to go for a run, but I didn’t. I had a bath, instead, which was quite nice! Normally, I wake up around 6.30am. I watch Sky News before Julian wakes up, as he doesn’t like watching the news. So Sky News with a coffee, shower, get dressed, and then I put on aftershave, weirdly, so I’m ready. Then I sit at my desk.

Jerry: Is having some kind of routine helpful in the present situation? Do you have one?

Charles: I think it’s very helpful. I have a lot more of a routine than I normally would because my usual working days are all so different, and I have to put on a lot of different hats. I have a timetable that’s very regular, but in between that I do teaching, styling and artwork. I really love that variety, whereas now it is very similar every day. Even if I think about how I used to come into work; I would run, or walk, or Tube it. This is a lot more like a routine. I am more regular than I have ever been!

Jerry: Well, it suits you, sir! You look fantastic!

Charles: Thank you very much!

Jerry: How would you describe the atmosphere in London at the moment? How do you differentiate between the stark reality of the present situation and this almost surreal sense of alienation?

Charles: I benefit from running every day because I can go to different areas of London to gather that information. I find that the tension levels are very different in different parts of London. I’m in Hackney Downs, which is next to Hackney Central. It is very residential, and the main street is full of shops and I feel like the energy is fine there, with people social distancing and living their lives! I get this weird, visceral feeling like, ‘Oh, fuck this’, especially on sunny days. Whereas when I run to Central London, across the South Bank to the studio, to the Embankment or I go through the City, it feels super creepy, like the film *28 Days Later.*[3] It feels a bit dangerous, actually, like anyone on the street could potentially harm you. Julian and I walked back from Somerset House when we did some work there and it felt a bit dangerous. This is when it first happened, so I don’t know what it’s like now so much.

Jerry: Dangerous in the sense that you could be the victim of some kind of attack that has nothing to do with the virus? A physical aggression?

Charles: For sure. I haven’t really received that much homophobic abuse in my time, even when I’ve put on certain looks, maybe because of my stature. But recently I’ve been with Julian, holding hands and I’ve been more aware of it. We were walking up Kingsway a week or so ago, and I felt quite scared to be in Central London. There’s a weird feeling in the air. I don’t know if that’s just me projecting stuff, and the circumstances are making my imagination wander…

Jerry: I think these are very natural reactions. We are living out many different fantasies at this time, in the broadest sense of the word. Trauma engenders fear.

Charles: One has to be very mindful of how we describe certain situations, because of the gravity of what’s going on, but there is also a slight poetry to the city right now.

Jerry: Is there one image that comes to mind? I run every day by the coast here as well, and every day I see something of its natural beauty, which has been wonderfully inspiring.

Charles: It’s like when you go to the ruin of a castle, and you are projecting what these people would be doing in this room or in this structure. I love that film *28 Days Later,* especially the opening scene when he is wandering around all the tourist attractions and they are completely empty. There is a weird poetry to the city. It was so powerful as an economy and now that is all stripped away, and you see these phallic sculptures, these big buildings and they feel invalid. I’m getting a weird vision in my head of when you put a tooth in a glass of Coke and you see the Coke devouring the tooth, or when you see bacteria growing. I don’t know where I’m going with this…

‘I’ve come from nothing. I’ve built up what we’ve got by being positive. To have to figure out what to do if all this went to shit goes against everything I am.’

Jerry: I think that’s a great analogy. These symbols of economic power that have completely lost their meaning, and of course, London is an intense social hub, in which the club and bar scenes are such an important confluence for all kinds of social interaction. As someone who is very involved, how are you experiencing these social restrictions?

Charles: I’m finding it quite hard not being able to dance to music and be peacocking, because I think there is something so healing in that. I’ve realized how important it is to my own work; being seen and seeing other people and just being collective and dancing. Julian and I have been trying to do dress up and take photos of ourselves!

Jerry: Let’s come back to that later! There are all kind of clichés about this situation, like ‘crisis breeds creativity’. Has your creative engagement been affected by your confinement? Do you feel creatively challenged or, to quote another cliché, are you experiencing this as ‘a time of reflection’ or a slowing down?

Charles: Well, I’ve experienced all of those things over the past couple of weeks! I must say that I am busier than I thought I would be, because I have been getting quite a lot of illustration commissions. I think people are retreating to that as a form of content. We have been doing things in-house, like sending collections to photographers to photograph. At first I was stressed out about deadlines, but I’m mindful of my friends who are now furloughed without any work and there’s me being stressed about a deadline!

Jerry: But are you now questioning the demands of that system? Do you feel a new sense of purpose regarding your own creative process?

Charles: I have come to realize that being a really good communicator is still so key to my creativity. I’m very democratic in my way of working. Designing these collections that we’re arcing out for much later drops feels even more democratic now, because we have to think about the impact on people. I’m trying to get opinions from lots of different places: what do you think of this? Should we do that? Should we be more sales-orientated? There are a lot of conversations. I have come to realize the power of my own drawing and illustration, and how impactful that is on the work, and on Loverboy as a brand. You can talk about a jacket, and you can design a jacket, and you can come at it from all these different places, but it’s not going to be yours unless you achieve it with your own primary research. For us, print and artwork has always been a big driving force of what we do. And in terms of sales, the pieces that have my prints on them always do a lot better than other things. It’s made me realize how important my own input is as an artist or a printmaker. People want art; they want prints and drawings even for projects that have nothing to do with fashion.

Jerry: That’s great to hear! As someone who self-identifies in a really visual way, do you still feel that you are expressing yourself personally in isolation? Are you dressing up? Are you using make-up? Are you finding this is something that you do more for yourself or for another? Has confinement limited that self-expression, or has it challenged you to take it to greater heights?

Charles: It’s nice being together, and Julian loves dressing up and putting make-up on and stuff, so we are doing a self-portraiture project. We have been thinking about being creative with make-up and self-expression for that, but then my own personal day-to-day dressing is quite limited, as my wardrobe is split between two places! I've been quite samey-samey in the way I've been dressing to go to the shop, but there was one day when we got super dressed up and we did really well! I did a big, high brow – it was very Pat McGrath-esque – and I decided I wanted to go to the shops. I put on my gloves and went to our local Co-op to buy our groceries, because I just thought, 'Fuck it – why not? I want to see how people react. I want to see if anyone is averse to it.' I just wanted to gauge it. And, honestly, I went into the shop and there were so many people who just smiled at me, and the cashier was, like, 'You look so lovely – you put all this effort in to come here.' I was, like, 'Yeah, well, fuck it – why not? We can't all just be in our pyjamas all the time.' That was a nice reaction. It would also be interesting to go for a run with a full face of make-up, sweating it all off and seeing how people react!

> **'We got dressed up to go food shopping. I did a big, high brow – very Pat McGrath-esque – put on my gloves and went to the Co-op. Fuck it – why not?'**

Jerry: There are pragmatic decisions to make and realities to face in terms of business models and choices at the moment, too. How are you addressing those?

Charles: I have been very mindful of all of these processes. When it first happened, we carried on designing the collection as normal, and I was kind of in denial about the whole thing, to be honest: 'It's just like the flu; it's just a panic and it will be over soon.' Sam, my colleague, called me in and said, 'I think this is going to be a lot worse than we imagine, and we need to make a real emergency plan.' And we planned right up to potentially going bankrupt and not being able to pay anyone. It was the worst week of my life, Jerry, because I see myself as such a positive person who utilizes that positive energy to draw myself out of things. I have come from nothing, absolutely nothing, and I have built up what we've got here by trying to be positive all the time. To have to figure out what to do if all of this went to shit, to project that thinking, goes against everything I am. But I would have been stupid if I hadn't done it. I had to think about who I might have to fire! It's making me emotional to think about it now. We had to make a plan and it was really difficult, but we have it in place now, if the worst comes to the worst.

Jerry: Have you had any government support? Are you on the receiving end of any of the proposals that the government has made for small businesses?

Charles: We are looking into it. There is a Covid-19 fund that the BFC have put forward.[4] They liquidated a few prizes to put that together, and we are working with our accountant at the moment on approaching the government. We're looking into everything! I know from my freelancer friends who are going through a similar thing that money isn't going to be available to them for quite a long time.

Jerry: You built your business from nothing, but if push came to shove and Charles Jeffrey the fashion designer had to reinvent himself from scratch, who would he be?

Charles: I'm very grateful to be in the position that I am in, doing what I love and what I have wanted to do since I was 16. But I have always wanted to exercise my ability as a painter. Taking that thing I was blessed with and pushing it as far as it can possibly go. I watch all these documentaries about different artists and painters and their commitment to the practice. I would love to be a painter. There is also something so amazing about this audiovisual thing. I don't want to make music per se, but I would love to collaborate with someone to make music, like Andy Warhol did with the Velvet Underground. I went to the Warhol exhibition just before lockdown, and those films of the time they toured with Andy Warhol to all these different colleges are fucking amazing![5]

Jerry: What other particular modes of escapism have you been indulging in to change your mood? Are there any websites or platforms that you've found inspiring?

Charles: There is one I always fall asleep to called melodysheep because I love anything about space and the universe. There's another really amazing audiovisual one of self-generated computer footage about concepts in physics. It's always scored really beautifully, and it's not got any formal narration aside from some text. There is one that describes how we are such a small chunk of this universe. It shows what it would be like if all of the stars burned out and we were in a universe of black holes! I love thinking about all of that. It's so… existential!

Jerry: The word 'unprecedented' has become very loaded these days. How do you feel that an 'unprecedented' event like this will impact our value systems, at a time when our idea of normal life is now a thing of the past? There is much abstract talk about our future, but how do we turn this abstraction into action? How do you feel we can move forward in our personal lives?

Charles: It's humanizing to listen to everyone's different lived experiences. I hope this makes us more mindful about how we are all born human and equal. This virus has no social boundaries. I hope people become more empathetic. I hope people are mindful of these conversations and take time to gather information and not finger-point or politicize what is going on. Some people are too quick to use the crisis as an opportunity to criticize people and put people down. This is not the time for that.

> **'I wonder how Grindr might be affected. Could they shut it down by arguing that it brings people together and that we need to avoid that right now?'**

Jerry: How will the gay community and its intrinsic web of social interactivity be affected? Do you fear for the hard-won freedom of certain communities, as governments threaten to curb civil liberties, restrict travel and movement, enforce medical checks and introduce more hard-line surveillance techniques?

Charles: For sure! I was speaking recently with Tim Blanks about the differences between the AIDS epidemic and this epidemic, and the relative quickness to action involved. At first, AIDS only affected marginalized communities and few people rose to their defence. This virus doesn't have any stigma attached to it and it affects everybody, and it spreads a lot more quickly. I know we've gained a lot of traction regarding LGBTQ rights, but if our right to be able to live out our experiences in private is tampered with through this need for the government to check in on us, that might affect our ability to feel secure. Everything is so immersive with club life and sex, so I wonder how an app like Grindr might be affected. Could they shut it down by arguing that it brings people together and we need to get rid of that right now?

Jerry: In the age of what has been termed 'surveillance capitalism' by writer Shoshana Zuboff, and the growing use of behavioural data harvested from social media, do you think it might be time to resist many of these digital platforms and return to a more analogue way of life?

Charles: I think a lot of people were hoping that this would be a catalyst for them to put the phone and computer down and maybe pick up a book or try a new hobby, but, if anything, I think it has promoted the opposite. I mean, I have loads of books sat there that need to be read! If anything, I have been drawing a lot. Going back to that idea of wanting to paint, I think that there is something so important about being tactile with the materials you use. I think that there needs to be a return to this.

Jerry: Painting is definitely a return to something tangible and physical, but, ironically in an age when we should be resisting surveillance capitalism and the dangers of data harvesting, this crisis has led us to be even more dependent on digital platforms. They are becoming the only sanctuary for creative performance with a 'live audience'. Can we resist the ubiquity of social-media platforms while maintaining an audience? How do you feel about having to navigate this minefield? Particularly as your shows are so much about performance and an engagement with the audience on a personal and often political level.

Charles: It's definitely going be a challenge! One can think about alternative treatments, whether it's a 360° film showcase on one model in a garment against green screen with a composited visual treatment, or an animated photographic collaboration with an artist like Tim Walker. There are so many things that we could do digitally, but I keep thinking back to the physicality of the claps that we do every Thursday for the NHS. I'm really latching onto the physicality of this action. I am hoping this crisis makes everyone think differently and we don't just all jump to digital. I know we are sliding towards this idea of digital platforms, but I want to figure out another way of doing things, which breaks that mould. I have this idea in my head of something travelling, something that is happening at a certain time, or something in the sky that everyone can see. It's about space, again; like Halley's comet or a full moon. I was looking at the full moon the other night and thinking how amazing it is because everyone can see it!

Jerry: We definitely need to think outside the box in order to proceed from abstraction to action. Normal is not normal anymore. We cannot just go back to something we knew before. It may be a slow metamorphosis, but there will be something that shifts radically. The Japanese have always had very codified forms of greeting, but how do you see our own physical and behaviour codes changing? It's going to be a while before people are hugging again, so how do you feel that you will address physical engagement?

Charles: It's very difficult. I'm such a gregarious person; I love a hug! I spoke with my local shop owner recently, an old cockney guy who had just got a plastic screen set up. He really didn't like it. He liked being able to chat to the customer and he found having this bit of plastic in front of him difficult to deal with. I think there will be restraint, but there might also be a form of comedy we develop in our interactions.

Jerry: The world was already in trouble before the arrival of Covid-19, and climate change and habitat destruction have both been instrumental in the evolution of new viruses. How do you see fashion's role in what will necessarily be a new world? How do we become active and responsible members of this new arena?

> **'I miss dancing. I miss going out. I miss getting dressed up and going to see my friends of an evening. It's such a big part of my personality.'**

Charles: You have to see the potential in your own working environment, and how you can be inspired by the local, whether with the materials you work with or the labour. Obviously, people need to save money, and we feel that pressure, especially at this point in our development when we are about to expand. It's about problem solving, and I enjoy that. I recently watched *In His Own Words*, the Martin Margiela documentary, and it was really fascinating to hear him talk about the potential he found in vintage pieces; how he reworked them, and how there was a need in the market for people to realize how design is a universal concept that can be taken on board by everybody.

Jerry: How is your family up in Scotland?

Charles: Thank God, they are all OK. I've got grandparents who are in their eighties, and my nan has got Alzheimer's. My grandpa is a fiercely independent man and has always had a very strong routine and now that has been jeopardized because he is in a high-risk category. My mum has been absolutely phenomenal. I think she puts a brave face on, as she has lost her job as well. I have been chatting to my family a lot more than I have ever been. I mean, we have always communicated, but now I call my mum two or three times a day, speak to my sister and message my dad. My dad is in Dubai, so it's a different set-up there. But even speaking with him is a whole other situation. I recently found out that my dad isn't my real dad. My biological father passed away last August, which I only found out a couple of months ago. His son and daughter didn't know I existed; I was, like, this 'affair baby'. But they made contact with me and we've been chatting! It's this weird *EastEnders* storyline, if you will.[6]

Jerry: The idea of family and community has always been at the heart of your work, whether it be the collaboration we worked on together for Matches and its traditional 'waulking' folk songs, or your most recent collection influenced by horse festivals in the Orkneys. It is such a part of your creative ethos, and particularly important now when an idea of togetherness will be the driving force behind our future. As a Scotsman and a member of the queer community, do you think this has always underscored your work? And will this crisis strengthen your belief in these ideals and carry you forward?

Charles: It's definitely made me realize the power in community, and how that can transform one initial idea into something much more powerful that we can all share and value. With the ability to take a traditional approach stripped away, we face a really interesting challenge at Loverboy to find new ways in which we can achieve that. On a professional level, my team and I have been able to communicate effectively through Zoom, but I have been mindful of keeping in touch with my friends who are DJs or who have club nights. We are getting back to the core of what everyone stands for, rather than the end result being a product. I want to reiterate what Loverboy stands for as a brand. Designers like Rick [Owens] and Craig [Green] have these ideas and worlds they have created that are intrinsically part of their product, but they do many other things. I am really interested in seeing how these people are going to react to the situation. I'm watching all of my contemporaries doing little projects, like Dilara [Findikoglu], who is doing all of these interesting things about how to wear Dilara at home. I was listening to [trend forecaster] Li Edelkoort on the Business of Fashion and she was talking about how education is going to change, because instead of people flocking to London for a fashion education, they will be going back to their own countries and learning their own, traditional ways of making clothing – different techniques, construction and embroidery, skills that have been lost and muddied over time. It's going to affect much more than just a brand's output. All those students who have been robbed of their degree show will have to be more mindful about how they communicate themselves as designers.

Jerry: So Charles, what are you up to this evening?

Charles: I am going to cook. I'm really in the mood to cook. I think I'm going to do a nice roast chicken.

Jerry: This crisis has driven us back into the kitchen. What are your isolation recipes of choice?

Charles: I have so many! I'm really lucky as my mum is a really good cook. I can't remember her formally teaching me anything, but I just do what she did. She was always good at soups. Two guys in a flat get through so much food. A roast chicken in a night! I do a nice Spanish omelette.

Jerry: What kind of music are you listening to? Is there music that is actually healing? I'm listening to Joni Mitchell.

Charles: I love Joni Mitchell.

Jerry: She is helping me through the whole thing.

Charles: I think the Grace Jones album *Nightclubbing* is a great album to put on in the evening. I love listening to classical music. I love French expressionism. I love piano. I love a lot of techno, and that is what I run to. I love running because that is the closest thing I get to clubbing right now. I like repetitive music, and running is really good for unlocking ideas. The best mixes are by Honey Dijon; there's one like an electronic thundercloud in a cave. When you are running you get goosebumps and run faster. It's amazing!

Jerry: Music is such a powerful federating force at the moment. What is the one thing that you are really missing?

Charles: I miss dancing. I miss going out. I miss getting dressed up and going to see my friends of an evening. It's such a part of my personality.

Jerry: Who would you like to hug today?

Charles: I would like to hug you!

Jerry: Oh, thank you!

Charles: I can't wait for our nights out again.

Jerry: Neither can I!

Charles: I tell you one thing – we are going to be so much more aware and present in those moments. It won't be so casual anymore. We're going to be so aware of it all. I think we're going to be crying.

Jerry: I think there is going to be a lot of crying.

Charles: But how beautiful is that going to be? Think of the emotion! I think we should bottle that mentally when it happens and really remember it. That is what I want to try and do: just be super present in those moments.

Jerry: Definitely. Thank you, Charles.

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1. In the UK, buildings of historical importance are listed to protect them from unnecessary or unauthorized demolition, alterations and extension. There are four grades – I, II, II and IV – with Grade I buildings being the most protected. Somerset House is a large Neoclassical building between the Strand and the River Thames in London. Home to the UK's tax authority for many years, it is now a 'working arts centre', which houses creative industries and the Courtauld Institute and Gallery.

2. Hoi Polloi is a 'modern brasserie' located inside the Ace Hotel in Shoreditch, London; it is open from 7.00 to 23.59.

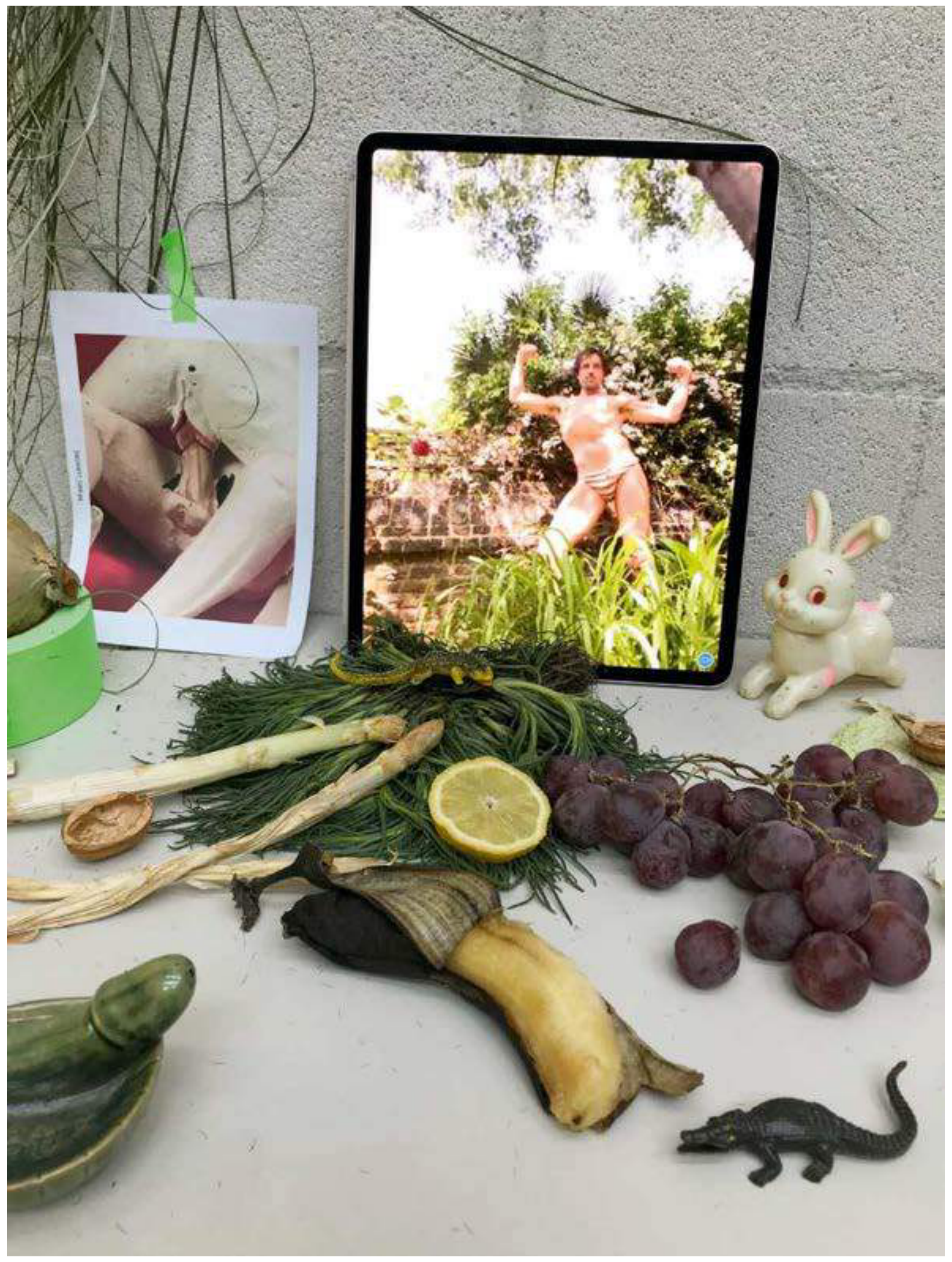
3. Released in 2002, directed by Danny Boyle and written by Alex Garland, *28 Days Later* portrays Britain whose population has been decimated by a mysterious virus. A celebrated early sequence shows the main character Jim (Cillian Murphy) wandering around an eerily empty and deserted Central London after leaving the abandoned St Thomas' Hospital. This was the same hospital in which UK prime minister Boris Johnson was treated for Covid-19 in April 2020.

4. The British Fashion Council's Foundation Fashion Fund for the Covid Crisis was set up to 'support creative fashion businesses and individuals' through the pandemic. It began with £1 million in emergency funds to help the hardest hit.

5. In 1966 and 1967, Andy Warhol toured the *Exploding Plastic Inevitable* (*EPI*), a groundbreaking multimedia light and sound show featuring three to five of his films projected simultaneously, discombobulating lighting effects, and live performances by Nico and the Velvet Underground. Alternative newspaper *East Village Other* described one performance of *EPI* in April 1966 as a 'frantic fandango of action'.

6. A soap opera broadcast on the BBC in the UK since 1985, *EastEnders* follows the dramatic lives of the residents of Albert Square in the fictional London borough of Walford. While its viewing figures now average around 5.5 million an episode, it retains the record for the highest-rated soap opera on British TV thanks to the Christmas Day 1986 episode, which attracted 30.15 million viewers.

Andreas Kronthaler and Isamaya Ffrench



**‘I respect everybody who makes
clothes, even a single collection.
It’s a hell of a difficult job.’**

**Andreas Kronthaler and
Isamaya Ffrench in conversation,
5 May 2020.**

Andreas Kronthaler: How are you?

Isamaya Ffrench: I’m good actually. How are you doing?

Andreas: I’m OK as well. It is really good to see you.

Isamaya: Yeah, you look great. I have the questions from *System* and they are rather good.

Andreas: What is the first question?

Isamaya: What is a typical day like for you in this period of uncertainty?

Andreas: It’s been like six weeks, and since the beginning I have built this routine and I am quite disciplined with it, even if I must say I am getting a bit bored of it now. So, I always get up at 7 o’clock, then I do a bit of yoga and then I have a bit of breakfast, make myself some eggs or porridge or whatever, then I go upstairs to Vivienne and we talk a bit. At the beginning I kept cleaning the house because I love cleaning; it is really relaxing and calming – I don’t need to think. So every day, I would spend an hour or two on tasks. Now I have gone through it all. To begin with, it was a break, time off from the usual rhythm, I didn’t think about work and it was great. Now it’s six weeks – I’ve never been away from work for so long in my life!

‘I like the richness of life, like all the stars in the sky; it is endless. I find it my duty to have another pair of shoes or another hairstyle, or whatever it is.’

Isamaya: I feel like you. Knowing you, and we have talked about this before, you’re never off apart from the short break after the shows. Have you ever been forced to decompress like this?

Andreas: No, but it’s been really positive on a very personal level. In some ways, I never want it to finish. Then there is Vivienne; it is a fact that we went into lockdown very early, because she is quite a bit older, so she is in a high-risk group. So, you know, I took the responsibility.

Isamaya: Is there anything that has surprised you about this, that you didn’t expect, creatively or personally?

Andreas: Absolutely not at all. I think in terms of our relationship, it’s become even more wonderful actually. We’ve known each other for 30 years, so we really do know each other; we know what to expect; we’re so familiar to each other. She’s got her rhythm and I have mine, and we both understand each other’s. It’s really been a most lovely time and we are still having that. At one point, we were cooking in the afternoon, nothing super special, what we’ve always done, but the best thing about this whole lockdown is eating earlier. I really love it, eating early, even around 6 or 6.30. Normally, we come back from work at like 8.30 or 9 and then cook something or have leftovers, and we end up eating at 9 or 9.30. Then an hour later you go to bed, so your sleep is not that great. I am realizing this now and that’s one thing I hope to continue, if this lockdown ever lifts.

Isamaya: I read something about the importance of having dinner together every night during this period. The importance of maintaining a routine, particularly dinner, as it gives you some form of structure.

Andreas: We are not running around and Vivienne is happy in bed reading for weeks and weeks, so the lockdown for her is no problem. But I am more hyperactive and need to move around, and I do love interaction; I live for that. I feel like I am coming out of it now and other things are starting to become more important again.

Isamaya: It is definitely the longest I have ever spent in my house in my life.

Andreas: Have you been working? Little projects on the social media?

Isamaya: I do a cosmetic range for a company called Byredo, so I have been doing a lot of admin and computer stuff.

Andreas: I have their sleeping oil; I’m running out.

Isamaya: I’ll get you some! It’s strange to have a routine; I haven’t had one since I was at university. I’m alright with it, but it does depress me a bit. I don’t mean I am depressed, but it does depress everything. I’m not trying to be creative. There’s no point in forcing something; it has to come naturally and if there are other things that are more important on a bigger scale to deal with, then I would rather do that.

Andreas: Me, too. I have brought some work home, but in this five or six weeks I have only done the most necessary things. I have really distanced myself; I might have drawn a few things, but just doodles. Nothing really with any particular aim.

Isamaya: There’s a question here that says, when things go back to normal, do you think your impulse will be to explore notions of fantasy and escapism or will you be more inclined to double-down on realism? I think the question is actually more, how will this change your approach?

Andreas: Guess what? I don’t know, even if, of course, sometimes I think about it. We can’t go back because what happened is the past. At the same time I can’t see into the future.

Isamaya: Do you think it will change your whole rhythm? My idea of you is that every show has a rhythm. You keep going, you build and change, it develops. You have themes that change, but there is a rhythm. Aesthetically, is it good to have a break? Will you go back with a different mindset?

Andreas: I don’t think so. I have experienced so many things in my life, really traumatic experiences, and they have never really shaped my vision or my view that much. It’s just that work is like one thing after the other; it is a development, but I’m not sure what it’s all about. I am just trying to do it better than before, if that makes sense. Sometimes I can be a bit happy about what I have done or what we have done, because it is all done with a big team. That’s what I miss the most, that exchange of thoughts and ideas, of different points of views.

‘I don’t believe you are as good as the last thing you did; I think it’s accumulative. Some days are good, some are shit, and that affects what you produce.’

Isamaya: What about with Christoph [Dobringer]?

Andreas: Christoph is my assistant, and I talk to him every day. I am also starting to talk to more people now and trying to get the wheel turning again a little. Christoph is a very sweet and talented man, but he is insecure. That’s not bad, though. I always prefer the kind of people who question what they do, rather than the ‘here I am and I am a genius!’ types.

Isamaya: I have been thinking about that recently and I envy people who live their work and their identity like that. These people who really *live* the image of themselves and the work they produce. I think I could be a bit more like that sometimes.

Andreas: I think you are, even if I haven’t completely grasped who you are yet. Maybe because I haven’t known you that long, but I think that you have a distance to what you do; you are always a bit above it. That is really good; it gives you perspective. You are also very flexible, and that is something I appreciate about you – you are not just this one thing. In the work you can do things 360 degrees – and that’s an incredible ability.

Isamaya: That is very nice of you! Some of the stuff that I’m completely secure about isn’t necessarily the work I am most proud of or have an interest in. I do it because it comes naturally.

Andreas: You should just keep going, as long as it comes easily. I know you want to do this filming and all that. Time is not running away…

Isamaya: But it is!

Andreas: No, it’s not. Not yet, really not yet. You really shouldn’t stress yourself.

Isamaya: Maybe it’s just the universal existential crisis that most people go through. Anyway, question: was there was a defining image, reference or person from your teenage years you can now look back on and say was instrumental in you working in fashion?

Andreas: I have always liked fashion. I have always liked how people looked, so I don’t think there is one defining image. It is step by step, you grow up in a certain way and everything adds to your experience. I don’t really look back that much; it’s not my type of thing.

Isamaya: I suppose they’re asking who your idols were growing up…

Andreas: I was living in the countryside in the 1970s and of course, those roots and experiences shape and form you. It was very, very rural, so there were television shows and films I loved. Films were very important growing up. It wasn’t escapism, but they made me dream and realize that there was an enormous world beyond the one I lived in. There were incredible things going on and they were just fascinating.

Isamaya: The next question: is there an influence that keeps returning to your work, and is that liberating, or do you find yourself wanting to discover new things or a new language?

Andreas: I am never totally satisfied with what I do and that keeps me trying to do something else, or trying to work on it again, to make it better. That is a big force behind what I think.

Isamaya: I definitely agree with that. There are questions, there is one down here about professional disappointment, I think my only disappointment was that maybe I wasn’t working and putting my energy into something I was passionate about. In terms of work, I don’t believe you are as good as the last thing you did; I think it is accumulative. So some days are good, some are shit, and that affects what you produce.

Andreas: Exactly, it doesn’t just depend on you, but also if the sun shines or not. I believe in the spirits and if they are all aligned, you become part of it, sometimes a big part, sometimes a small part.

If everything is aligned then it is great and all works, but if something doesn't work that well, then it isn't aligned. Things are rarely perfect.

Isamaya: How do you deal with criticism?

Andreas: I like criticism nowadays, but I didn't when I was younger. It hurt me and my pride. Over the years, I have worked on myself and tried to develop my work and what I do, even as a human being. I explore. I've learned that sometimes it's good for me to look at things I don't like. I used to avoid things and criticism was one of them.

Isamaya: They say a sign of madness is not having any doubt. I completely agree with that. I remember talking to my psychoanalyst about feeling worried that I might be going mad, and she said, 'Mad people don't worry about going mad; they don't have doubt.' And I think you can apply that more generally to people and the way that they work. The more criticism, the better, if you trust the people.

'I don't even think in terms of femininity or masculinity, but I am not designing clothes for women or men! My job is just about individuals.'

Andreas: It depends. As long as it is comes from a good place and you are able to use it constructively.

Isamaya: Did you strive to be different from a young age?

Andreas: I certainly never wanted to have the same pair of shoes as everyone else; I always wanted something else. I'm not sure if I wanted to look different or if it even went that far, but I always liked that variety. It was inborn, one of life's phenomenon. I like the richness of life, like all the stars in the sky; it is endless. I find it my duty to have another pair of shoes or another hairstyle, or whatever it is.

Isamaya: That's funny because when I read that question, I approached it very differently. I didn't think about image. I definitely wasn't ever trying to be different, but looking back now, I do see now that within my friendship groups I was an absolute loner. I did have groups of friends, but often I would have just one friend very intensely. I would do lots of sport outside of normal socializing. I only realize that now; at the time that was just how it was. What was your social life like as a teenager?

Andreas: I was outdoors a lot; we weren't allowed to be inside. I wanted to watch films, but my mother would just turn the television off and send me out. I had a group of friends and I was very close to them, but I am only in contact with one of them now. Martin. He was my best friend, who I've known since kindergarten. He's the only one I am still in contact with. At a certain point, one looks back at one's pains and growing up and it has a certain colour, and I tended to colour it wonderfully. It was a nice place with a lot of nature and fresh air around me, and nice people, but I am not sure how happy I was as a child. I always wanted to go out into the world.

Isamaya: Is there someone in the fashion industry you admire, and why?

Andreas: I admire Vivienne, of course, I would say that. I love her work, and not just because I am with her. I love the way she approaches her work: so straightforward and so outspoken.

Isamaya: Does her liberated and free way of thinking and being inspire you to be like that as well?

Andreas: I'm not sure because one is who one is. Maybe I tried once to be like her, but I don't think so. She just encourages me and that's so generous and special. She has always been that way; I try to be the same to her. At one point we were working extremely close together; we chose every little button together; we put it all together. That has changed over the years because she is so much more involved in her activism and that is not my battlefield; I get on with the fashion. But she is the one who I truly admire. I respect everybody who makes clothes, even a single collection. It's a hell of a difficult job.

Isamaya: Remaining true to who you are is the most impressive thing. The majority of people, whether it is in music or fashion, are making things to satisfy an audience or a market. Things used to be a response to something. Now, it's like, what can you respond to? Creativity and fashion are like a rollercoaster.

Andreas: It was too fast before all this. You made clothes and they were in the shop for a month or so. Someone would see this great suit but then it disappeared after a month and another suit came in. It wasn't a better one; it's just the other one had already disappeared. Nobody can enjoy things – there isn't even enough time even to consume it properly.

Isamaya: What continues to motivate you is probably the right question to follow on. When you are constantly consuming information, how do you find space to make stuff?

Andreas: Something feeds me, gives me food for thought, and that triggers something and then I start working on it. Now I tend to carry on and go to the next. Before the lockdown, we had more or less finished next summer, so when the lockdown started, we reduced it again. All these exercises help to focus. With circumstances as they are, no one is in the studio. In Italy, they are just starting to work again, so what do you do? You reduce things to a minimum, and you refer to things that already exist because there aren't the facilities and time to do something new.

Isamaya: Do you ever go through periods of nihilism?

Andreas: Oh yes, sometimes I am extremely frustrated and think it is all total rubbish and nobody needs any of it. Especially in relation to the state of the world and where it is going. That seems so dramatic and you think, who needs another pullover or sweater?

Isamaya: But your work is as much art as it is fashion. Do you search for meaning in what you do?

'I used to go to a female psychoanalyst, and after some years, she said, You need a male psychoanalyst. She was right. Since then I'm easier around men.'

Andreas: I don't know. Fashion is about people, humans; they're very central to my interests. I like animals, of course, but I don't need to dress them. Of course, you *can* dress them, but I am not sure how necessary that is. I like people; they are amazing creatures.

Isamaya: When was the last time your work was copied? Is imitation ever a form of flattery?

Andreas: Sometimes people say to me that they find the work inspiring and of course, that is flattering. It can happen that they copy things. It is good to copy; we all copy from somewhere.

Isamaya: People who copy maybe don't have many ideas; I'm not scared of not having ideas. More questions: your visions of femininity are unlike anyone else's. When did they become full-bodied and more consistent?

Andreas: When I met Vivienne, for sure; she really taught me this. I am not really a woman, so she taught me how women think and how they feel and can feel. I am so happy that I worked with her. I have always been quite comfortable with women. I used to go to a psychoanalyst, a woman, and at one point after years, she said, I think you should go to a man, you are missing something. It was true and since then I am much easier with men. I had always preferred women to that point and that was right into my 40s.

Isamaya: Was your dad quite an oppressive figure in your life?

Andreas: No, he was a lovely man. I wasn't sure about my father until late, maybe because I am very like him. All the supposed talent, the creativity, I inherited from him. I wasn't that respectful of him until recently; now I realize what a great, wonderful man he was. He was a superman and he always knew what he was doing. I should have respected that, but I didn't somehow.

Isamaya: It's a hard question about femininity; I don't even think in terms of femininity or masculinity, but I am not designing clothes for women or men! My job is just about individuals.

Andreas: In recent years, this is what you are always asked about, the blurring between men and women. I have always thought the same, so nothing has ever changed. Of course, it is great now that things are not put in these clichés and categories any more. I am happy about this. I remember 20 years ago when we did men's shows that pushed certain buttons, people were so critical and laughed. Not that I mind this, because I think humour is an important aspect of fashion or one's being. But they didn't laugh about it in a good way. I remember thinking: half the men in the world wear a dress! Anyway, I never put men in real women's dresses. There is a difference between a dress and a dress; a dress looking great on a man and dress looking not great on a man. Then there is drag, but that is a whole other world.

Isamaya: I was just going to say, it's only really in the past few years that I've come to accept that I am a woman. That may sound ridiculous because obviously I look very feminine, but I was mostly brought up by my dad, who has Asperger's, and I was a very late developer and felt so much more comfortable in adopting a boy's approach to life and communication: not being overemotional, being quite logical. It's still something I need to investigate and feel more comfortable with, because I am definitely not accepting and using my femininity…

Andreas: That is what I like about you; you are going both ways. You can be this tomboy or a femme fatale. Stupid words, but you go down both roads, and I think that is really good.

Isamaya: Everyone is on a sliding scale. People want to define themselves because it is important, but it is very hard. Are you this or that? Are you gender fluid? You even have to define that now, but who cares, just be.

Andreas: I don't like this categorizing, all these boxes; I really don't.

Isamaya: I mean, it's important to recognize what people have done before you in order to give you that freedom to be whoever you want to be and do whatever you want to do. I was watching *The People vs. O.J. Simpson* recently and it made a point about him rejecting his heritage and instead wanting to be known for being O.J. He didn't want to be defined by his ethnicity or his heritage, and that is sort of understandable. I don't know why I am bringing that up! I suppose it's the idea of him feeling like he wanted to be him for him – that I understand. So, who did you find the most beautiful when you were 12 years old?

Andreas: Like I said, I really liked films and was glued to the television. Then as soon as I could go to the cinemas, I saw all the classics in this world. There were amazing women in them and I was really taken by them. People were so extreme; they looked so extreme. Brigitte Bardot might be OK now, but when she hit the screen with her undone hair, she was just incredible. The opposite was Ava Gardner. So many incredible beauties!

Isamaya: I know it is an obvious reference, but Madonna and her message were so powerful – and still are. She was so unique in her place, and her message of authenticity and not giving a shit is so inspiring. At the time, people maybe didn't like her or what she stood for and found it distasteful, but that is now why we like her: she was a boundary pusher who challenged people's ideas. It is hard to be that today. There is so much scrutiny from social media to be woke and PC and not offend anyone. You know what I mean?

Andreas: I love Madonna; I am very happy that you mention her. I grew up with her and she was really clever. As you say, she could do so many things; she had really a lot of different facets. Amazing.

Isamaya: Just the things that she did, she did some shocking things, socially shocking videos and her choice of characters...

Andreas: She is brave.

Isamaya: She is. It's hard to be shocking any more, because everyone is so fearful of being offensive – but that is a whole other discussion! Final question, what do you now know about the fashion industry that you didn't know when you started?

Andreas: I didn't know how much work it was and is! I didn't have a clue. Even if I don't think it would have stopped me entering it. Before I knew that, everything looked amazing and it felt like the dresses just fell from the sky! But no, it's a hell of a lot of work; I think it's the same in your field. Actually, the faces that look the most effortless are those that take the most work.

Isamaya: I didn't realize I would be dragging four suitcases around with me every day! If I could give up one thing, it would be that.

Andreas: I wouldn't want to be a make-up artist or a hairdresser. The best thing is to design lingerie because you can just stuff it all into a tiny little carrier bag and have a huge collection in it! Do you go out every day as well?

Isamaya: I do exercise and I am making lots of music at the moment.

Andreas: How?

Isamaya: I have a sound-engineer friend, we've been working a lot together and will probably put some stuff out soon.

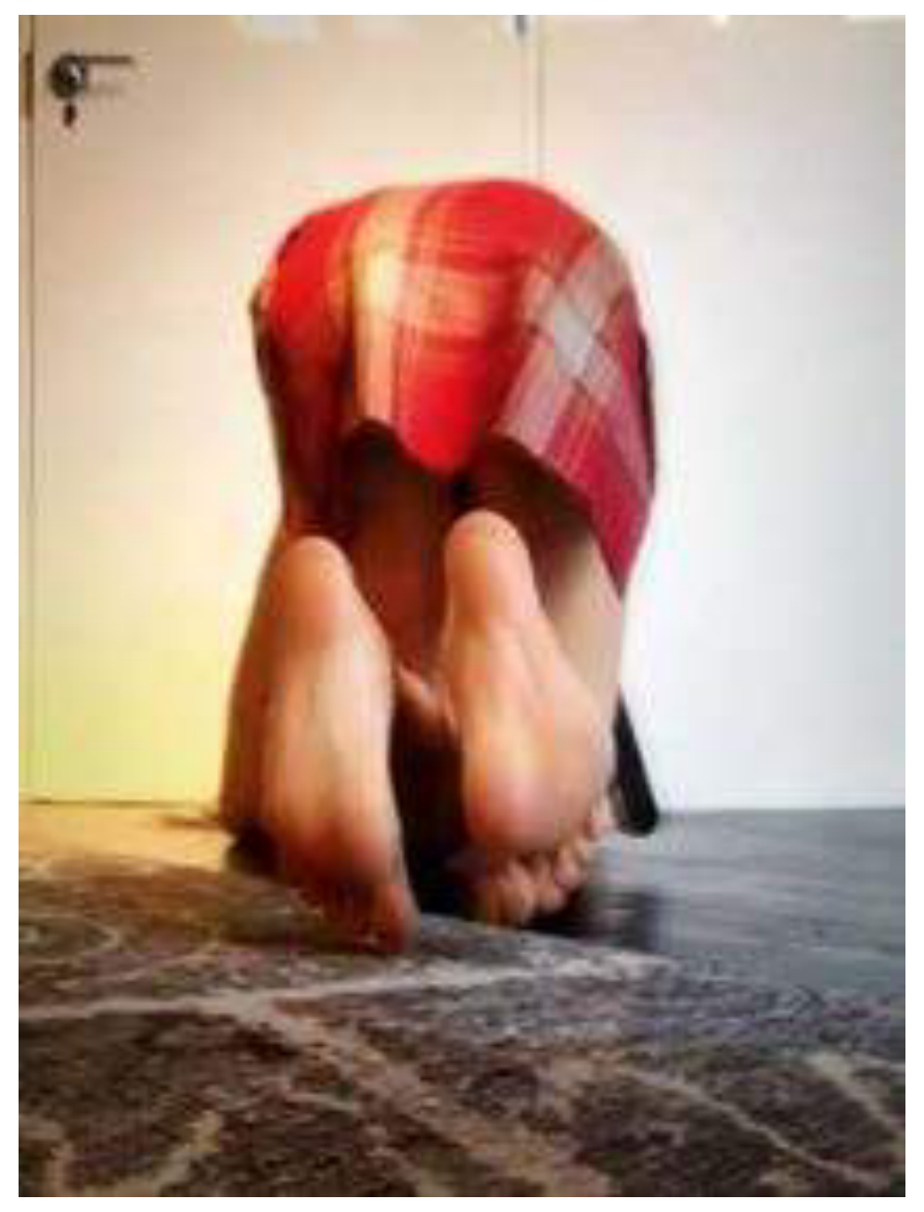
Andreas: So you are keeping busy.

Isamaya: Most of the time. Are you not really allowed out?

Andreas: I think it will start loosening up next week.

Isamaya: We will see what the next steps are. I don't know about you, but I think it will be hard to go back, to do work that doesn't feel vital and necessary. It reminds you, time isn't infinite and it is important to do what makes you happy, be with people who make you happy because we only get one shot. This situation has definitely made me feel that. It might be harder to do jobs that I don't really care about, because I now care more about what I do with my time.

Andreas: You will make the right choices, Isamaya, once you are front in them. It would be great if we do see a difference between before and after, because there should be – I just don't know what it will be like.



Angela Missoni and Margherita Missoni

‘We have been using this time to organize and to imagine our future.’

Angela Missoni and
Margherita Missoni in conversation,
8 May 2020.

Margherita Missoni: Let’s start with a few questions about the lockdown. Has it changed your daily routine?

Angela Missoni: I think this is the first time I’ve stayed at home for so long; two months in a row at home. Of course, I started using the time to fix things in the house, to put things in order, to go through pictures and boxes and stuff. There is still a lot around. I think I need another quarantine to get it all done!

Margherita: Is that a relief or do you feel uneasy living in a more organized environment?

> **‘I was shy in school about saying too much about our family’s work, because I knew my friends and my teachers simply wouldn’t understand.’**

Angela: No, no, no, I love it when things are tidy and organized. I hate it when it is untidy. You can see the difference in the various areas of my house, right? You can see the kitchen, which is always very organized. I can get maniacal about organization, too.

Margherita: You are very organized, but I think because you are very busy, you leave things behind, and you don’t throw things away.

Angela: Because everything has a meaning, and everything can be useful for something else, either an idea or something practical. I don’t throw away any ribbon, for example. I have boxes of ribbons. I have ribbons spilling out of drawers.

Margherita: Are there any good practices from this time that you think you might continue?

Angela: I hope so, but I have no idea. I am always curious about tomorrow, and in these times I try not to make plans. I am doing a lot of gardening every day. The experience of witnessing, for the first time, the differences in the garden every single day, every single moment of spring, that was exceptional and very inspiring, and something I would like to keep in my life. But, at the same time, I’m not sure I will be able do it. Having a garden in this moment is an amazing privilege.

Margherita: Has any of this had a positive impact on your creative practice?

Angela: You need to be creative in life. I don’t just mean imagining a dress or fabrics or a style. You need to be creative and to use your creativity. So, during these two months, I have had to put my creativity into many different fields, such as the organization of the company. This has pushed my creativity, because when you are stuck here, all you can do is let your mind and your imagination fly outside the house.

Margherita: In terms of your post-lockdown work, will you be keener to explore notions of fantasy and escapism, or more inclined towards documenting the moment and realism?

Angela: There is a duality in my job, as you know. I have a creative job, a job of creative direction, and that always takes a bit of escapism. But then the other side is that I am the president, where I need to use reality and try to be creative in imagining the reality of tomorrow and how to adapt to a new way of working and thinking. As a company, we have used this time in a very creative way. We have made some very important moves for the future. We haven’t just been staying in and waiting for what is going to happen tomorrow; we have been using this time to organize and to imagine our future.

Margherita: Have you thought about the shows and how you will present your work this time around, and in the future, too?

Angela: Of course, of course, but this is not a process that only just started. I have been thinking about what the future of shows and fashion weeks could be for many years. What is the meaning of the show today? There are many different aspects of the shows. We are still exposed a lot – a good 60 to 65% – to wholesale, so we need to present the collection to the buyers. But the shows today have become like a big event for a company, rather than the final customer, right? So something needs to rewind; something needs to be understood. How do you present to your buyers? How do you present your collection and at what kinds of events? How do you present to the final customer? This is a big discussion, and something that is on my mind. We were already thinking about how to present the collections in a digital way anyway, and about what it means to present using all the content that you have to produce for digital media, social media, and so on. I don’t think that the right thing now would be to replicate a real fashion show, which is a concept that started at the beginning of the last century and is really coming to an end now. It doesn’t make sense to me. A fashion show still means something if there is a public, if there is common excitement, and you present something; it is like going to a concert where something magical can happen. If it is a good show, there is a magic that happens in those 15 or 20 minutes that builds the image of the company and helps creates an emotion for it. A digital experience cannot exactly replicate that, because the digital experience is something that you have on your own.

Margherita: Who are the shows for? I guess that when you decide who they are for, then you can decide on the show.

Angela: It is more of a presentation, not even a show. This is very different from what the conglomerates, the big names do; that is pure communication and nothing more. For us, it is still a way of selling fashion to buyers.

Margherita: One of the most positive things to have happened during the lockdown has been a sort of heightened sense of community, people getting together and holding each other up. Do you think that something will come of this in the Italian fashion community? Will Italians get together at this point? There is that famous photo from the 1980s of all the Italian designers…[1]

> **‘Fashion in Italy has never really been supported by the government. Perhaps a little more in the past five or six years, but, honestly, we need more.’**

Angela: Yes, but your grandma is missing from that picture!

Margherita: I noticed! Are you experiencing some sort of Italian pride? Is Italian fashion getting together to give mutual support?

Angela: Not yet, but I do think the [fashion trade body] Camera della Moda is working. It’s keeping us up to date, and at the moment it is very busy dealing with our government.

Margherita: Has the Italian government helped fashion in the past, and has that changed now?

Angela: I honestly think, and this over a long period of time, because I was already listening in as a teenager, that fashion in Italy has never really been supported. Perhaps a little more in the past five or six years, but, honestly, we do need more; we need the full understanding.

Margherita: ‘Made in Italy’ is a trademark, and not only for fashion. An interesting development over the last 20 years, is the organic food [label], which is now recognized by everyone, and has changed people’s mindsets about the difference between good and bad food. Do you think Italian craftsmanship, or craftsmanship in general, could go through a similar process, and change collective beliefs?

Angela: I do, because I think people are going to start appreciating craftsmanship more and more. They will better understand Italian craftsmanship, as well as all the special and unique skills we have here. People are going to be paying more attention to the quality of the craftsmanship, which is going to become much, much more important.

Margherita: If fashion brands are able to get together and find a common way to communicate that, then something similar could happen in fashion. Over the past years, all of us have been living lives less related to the places where we are from or where we have lived; we have become citizens of the world, and everything became a bit more homogenized. Now things will probably change because travelling will be harder, so we will be more geographically located in a specific place. Maybe characteristics from specific places will stand out more. Do you think this is a chance for Italian fashion to really push its Italian-ness, not just from the production standpoint, but also in terms of style? Back in the day, it was easier to recognize an Italian label than it is now.

Angela: Italy has a unique place in the world. It is a country that can really trade on the desire to be here, the desire to have a souvenir of Italy. Something Italian is something special. It has always been like that, and it will always be like that. You know, Italian quality is what you find in high-end fashion products. Most of them are produced in Italy, although maybe you don’t recognize the Italian quality, because they have a French label. Italian quality is made up of a lot of small-scale artisans. We have the potential to push our product, so let’s hope that we can all recover easily and quickly from this lockdown, which has put a lot of companies in big trouble, in all fields and at every level.

Margherita: Let’s move away from the lockdown to some questions about the past. From a young age, you always strived to be different, to look different as an individual, although you were also very shy. How did you solve that contradiction and make it work? What were the influences that made you, on the one hand, very shy and on the other, kind of eccentric?

Angela: I was shy, I think, because I realized at an early age that I was surrounded by very special people, starting with my parents and their friends. I always felt that they were so bright and intelligent that I had to just listen. I have always been very curious, though. Not communicating and not expressing myself was not because I didn't have anything to say – it was because I was very busy listening. I started to express myself much later, really, even if I had always felt free to express myself. I wasn't pushed to be quiet; I was just allowed to be. I had a lot of freedom of expression, even in the expression of being quiet, and my parents had a lot of respect for individuality.

> **'I've always felt that being the second generation, I had to leave this project to the third generation; to leave it with legs to walk on, not as a burden.'**

Margherita: How did you create your own individuality, in the end, within the tightness of our family?

Angela: I think I was born with broad shoulders; I never felt that the Missoni company... I felt I was part of something very special, and that my parents were doing special things that were different from what the parents of the other pupils at school did, with their vision of life. I was shy in school about saying too much of what was happening in my house, of what I was witnessing, because I knew my friends and my teachers wouldn't understand. I only ever had one girl friend; I never had a lot of friends, a big community, like you. I kept all my thoughts to myself, because I always felt I couldn't be understood. I didn't have a problem with this though, that's the point I'm trying to make. It wasn't a problem for me not to be understood, because I knew there was something special over there. It's been a journey and an experience, but one very important thing that made me open up and express myself was maternity. From when I was very young, I always had this feeling that I had to have children, and in fact, I had them young for my generation. As I always say, from that moment, all of a sudden you have this enormous love that you can't retain; the love you have for your baby. Suddenly I was more open to the world, more understanding of it, and this helped my character. It really changed my character, and I started to become more confident in myself. I was working in the company just to get some pocket money, and then I was in and out with every child. When I was pregnant with Teresa, I went to my dad and I think that was the only day I was ever depressed in my life. Perhaps things weren't going in the direction I wanted. I felt that there was something wrong in my life, and I went to your grandpa and said, 'I've realized I am never going to work in this company again.' He asked why, so I said, 'Because I think I want to do this and that, design jewels and do children's clothes.' And then he told me, 'You know, if you have ideas, you can do things in this company on your own. You don't need to work with your mother every single day.' He understood that my mother had a very strong character and I needed to stand on my own two feet; I needed to find my confidence. At that moment, I started following the licensing. That was the point when I realized that I was capable. After three years I realized that I knew how to express all the aspects of Missoni in products. But then I realized I really wanted to do fashion. Missoni, the original label, was becoming a classic, and it was not what I wanted for myself. I started thinking I wanted to design fashion and express myself in that. So, with the permission of the family, I asked to do my own line, knitwear, and I started to develop a solid silhouette, relief and textures, and to experiment with yarns. I could see that my mother was really impressed by the fact that I could follow all the processes, all together, and after the show for the fourth or the fifth collection, she came and asked if I would think about doing the main line. She said what I was doing was what she thought Missoni should have been, and that fashion is what you do when you are young and still passionate and strong, so that you can fight for your ideas with the commercial side of the business. I accepted, and I took over. Not straight away; I just started to give my opinion and to work on the direction of the show and the collection, to pull out what I thought was the essence of Missoni. I have always been very curious to meet people who know more than me. I know there are many people who know much more than me and I have always been very curious about learning these different processes.

Margherita: What are you most proud of? What change are you most proud of in the company since you took over in 1997? Both creatively and structurally.

Angela: Oh my God. The first thing was that I immediately saw that I had given my mother a second life creatively, and this was a really big source of pride for me. I have always been very thankful for what I received from my family, and besides the fact that I had a lot of fun and it was very interesting and very special, I always had the feeling that I had to take care in what I did, because it was my duty to fix things in the company, too. But the fact that I gave her a second creative life – I was really very proud of that. For the rest, I think that the company deserved that attention. Structurally, the company has changed many, many times over the last 25 years – sometimes very slowly – but I am very happy that we have kept the family together, and the third generation can enter. And, of course, we managed to find a financial partner like FSI, which I am very proud of.[2] I arrived at a point where I was looking forward, because I've always felt that being the second generation, I had to leave this project to the third generation. I had to leave it with some legs to walk on, not as a burden. I am very proud that I gave this project the legs to keep it going for many years to come. Creatively, I am proud that I kept the Missoni language, but have made it modern. I always said my parents invented the Missoni language and I was able to introduce new words, like a new lexicon into that language. And keeping that language modern: yes, I am proud of that.

Margherita: Which person working in the fashion industry do you most admire and why?

Angela: There are so many people, on so many levels, but... my mother. I'll go back to my mother, yes.

Margherita: And looking at past legends, whose work do you wish you had created?

Angela: Coco Chanel's.

Margherita: When you work creatively, can you give an example of what is most intuitive for you in your work and what you overthink?

Angela: I always work very intuitively; I go from one thing to the next.

Margherita: For me, doing colours would be a very intuitive thing, but then I would probably overthink fabric weights, and all of that.

Angela: But this will come with experience; it will become more immediate once you have more experience.

Margherita: Do you require a deadline to achieve your best results?

Angela: Yes. I have always said that deadlines are very important because you have to concentrate.

Margherita: Do you find it worrying to be without the distractions of deadlines and schedules?

Angela: No. At the end of the day, I am very realistic, so if I can't do something, I adapt. The disruption just pushed everything back a month or a month and a half, so I adapted. There is nothing you can do, so you work on the problems you can solve in the moment, and think for a bit longer about the other ones. Everything I could do, we did. We have to move a deadline? We move the deadline. That is what it is going to be. It's not in my character to panic. I don't panic easily. I am lucky; I am very grounded.

Margherita: And do you still wake up with ideas at 4am and start writing e-mails?

Angela: It depends! There are moments in which, yes, sometimes I am behind in answering e-mails and maybe I do wake up at night. But I've never really suffered from insomnia, though I have had moments where I have slept less. Recently, I do sleep better. I don't wake up at night.

Margherita: And how do you deal with criticism? Have you got better at coping with this over time?

Angela: Yes, for sure. But I think I had a good background in that, because I was used to reading the reviews for my parents' collections, and listening to things. I'm used to seeing and being accustomed to criticism for the collections, so I know that criticism can happen. I know that this is a very difficult job, selling clothes and selling fashion. Every season, you have a challenge. The label is alive and has made an impact on fashion trends several times through its 67 years of existence. There have been many criticisms in our history, but we managed to get over them, so we should embrace the criticisms and try to do better next time. Anyway, after every show, my reaction is to say, 'OK, that's done, let's work on the next one.' I always try to look to the future.

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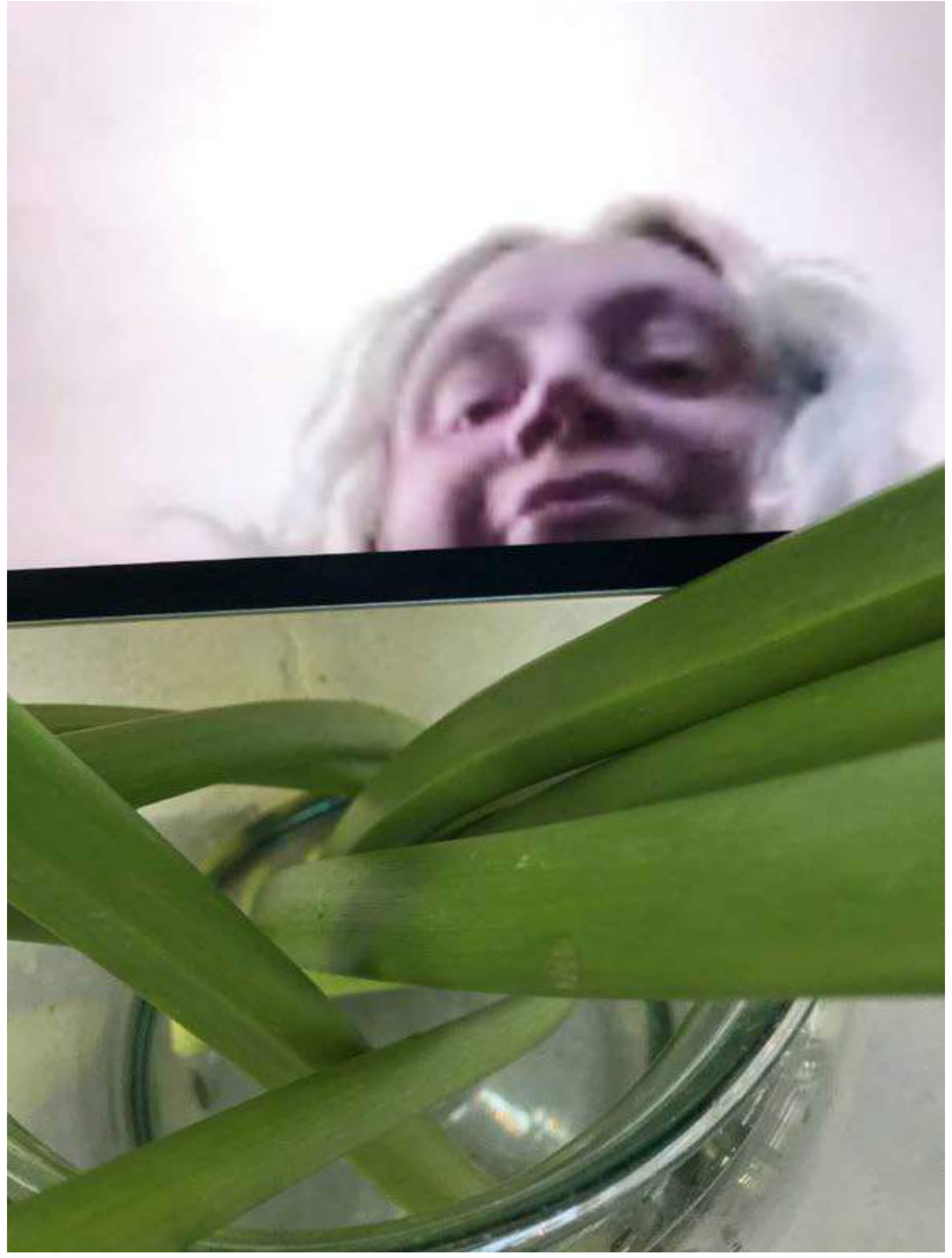
1. Taken by Dan Coxe for *Capital International* magazine in 1985, the photograph shows Tai Missoni, Laura Biagotti, Mario Valentino, Gianni Versace, Krizia, Paola Fendi, Valentino, Gianfranco Ferré, Mila Schön, Giorgio Armani, Franco Moschino and Luciano Soprani in front of Milan's Duomo.

2. FSI, a Milan-based investment fund, purchased 41.2% of Missoni in June 2018.

Rick Owens and Gwendoline Christie



‘Being forced to stay inside has made me go inside.’

Rick Owens and Gwendoline Christie in conversation, 21 April 2020.

Rick Owens: Where are you?

Gwendoline Christie: I’m with Giles [Deacon] in London; are you in Paris?

Rick: Yes. Have you gone out?

Gwendoline: For exercise. And you?

Rick: I’ve been inside the entire time.

Gwendoline: I have been pretty militant about it, but I have been out for my exercise. I bought a bicycle and I cycle around the city. You entertain dreams about leaving your home, to go somewhere better, but then you realize that there is nowhere better than home. Particularly in the midst of all the chaos. It’s home in an entirely different context. I have a feeling that you have a really beautiful home because I have been stalking… I regularly view your Instagram. So I assume you’re in the Palais Bourbon.[1]

‘The clapping for health workers is beautiful. We’ve become increasingly scared of intimacy so it’s an abstract intimate moment we can all share.’

Rick: I feel a little guilty about saying how much I am enjoying it.

Gwendoline: What are you enjoying?

Rick: I can be pretty reclusive anyway, and having the excuse to just stay in; it’s time to gestate, formulate and absorb. And the other thing is, you know, it’s a great place to live. We have this great terrace, and enough space to roam around. It is very monastic. All grey concrete and a couple of cats and this excuse to just sit and appreciate, and be grateful and look at the clouds and enjoy the sun. Our roses are starting to bloom and the jasmine is heavenly. It’s a chance to recharge, regroup and research. Some people on a forum asked me about the future of the fashion system and fashion deliveries, but I don’t feel qualified to give strong opinions. I haven’t really confirmed how I want to move forward. It is a great reset. The part where everybody leans out of the window to clap for health workers, isn’t that the best thing ever, and a great reminder of unity?

Gwendoline: I’ve never before felt a connection like that with my fellow man; the first time I was shocked by how much I responded to it. That is something beautiful that has emerged. Human beings have become increasingly scared of intimacy and that is an abstract intimate moment we can all share. I never expected that. The pause is interesting. I did think that you might enjoy the pause, because you do four shows a year, don’t you?

Rick: Yes, but I love that sense of purpose and that drive. I’m not collapsing. Those guys who work for the big companies, they have so many voices to listen to and so many different pressures that I just don’t have. It’s a totally different world. I am completely spoiled.

Gwendoline: Remaining independent means that you are your own master. It has always thrilled me the way you have stuck to your own aesthetic and the world has come to you.

Rick: Well – I am sure you went through this – at the beginning you think why am I insisting that somebody acknowledge what I want to contribute? Where does that arrogance or that confidence come from to think that people should stop and respond to me?

Gwendoline: It’s the duality of not being able to be anything else, actually, and also when enough people tell you no, you want to kick back against that. I’d be lying if I said I don’t really care if they are listening to me, because I do care.

Rick: I do, too, of course. It’s a conversation; you are speaking and people are responding. Everyone on the planet wants to speak and be listened to. We are so lucky. For the people out there who don’t get that response, it must be like being buried alive.

Gwendoline: For a long time I was working, but I wasn’t particularly enjoying my work. Then a genuinely weird, miraculous combination of elements-brought along a part that I had always wanted to play, yet didn’t think existed. It was an exploration of the things that I was most scared of in myself. And it happened to become a hit. The reason why I loved it so much was because it was a freak. No one thought it would work; there were no expectations. I wanted people to like it, but I didn’t expect them to. Good things come when you work from the inside out, instead of courting attention, wanting approval.

Rick: It’s not just entertainment. People need it. If people are responding like that it means you are filling some kind of hole. Think of all of the girls who you have influenced. There is going to be whole generation! It’s moving, isn’t it?

Gwendoline: I can’t connect to that because I can’t be responsible. A lot of it is luck. So much of the world is arbitrary. I was thinking about this newish way of life and what clothes to wear for it, and I thought, ‘Rick Owens’ because it translates from wearable pieces to emotional, sculpted pieces and it works on a bicycle, in your home, at a party, it works at a disco, at a huge global red-carpet event. Have you consciously designed that way?

‘There are paintings in the Louvre of nymphs and satyrs enjoying life. We now have an excuse to do the same: lying under a tree, reading in the afternoon.’

Rick: A lot is just gut instinct. It’s the same with your work I guess. I try not to overthink things, but I have been using this time to study, going through piles of books that I had set aside. Go to the Louvre and there are so many paintings of nymphs and satyrs lying in gardens and enjoying their lives. This is exactly what we now have an excuse to do. Lying under a tree, reading in the afternoon. It’s…

Gwendoline: …bliss.

Rick: Every day I can’t believe I get to do this for another day! I have been looking at a lot of art books; my old Joseph Beuys books, interior art deco, art, biography.

Gwendoline: I learned about Beuys through you; I couldn’t believe he even existed. It is my idea of perfection, to live your life that way, as an exploration of an artistic experiment.

Rick: He’s the reason I dropped out of art school. I could never get to that level, so I just gave up and became a fashion designer instead.

Gwendoline: That was probably a good move. In terms of following one’s instinct, I’ve been thinking a lot about Joseph Beuys and Rudolf Steiner, of intuition and the inside. Being forced to stay inside has made me go inside. I have read a lot; more than I have read for years. It took a few weeks for me to be able to sit and digest books in the way I used to, but now I can just sit and read. I’m enjoying having more of a reflective thought process. I have to say that I really love your designs: the clothes, and the shows. I was having a conversation with friends and they said these could have been the last fashion shows we ever see. And I thought, ‘Well, that was a pretty good one.’

Rick: Oh, it was. It was really good.

Gwendoline: It had so much vitality to it, Rick. Then you created that tour bus, which I think more people are going to want to go on after this – a mobile environment they can live in.[2]

Rick: Isn’t that funny? You are right, that was very interesting timing.

Gwendoline: Have you thought any more about that? I think it will take people some time to feel the confidence to dissociate the outside from threat. Have you thought about creating more complete environments? Would you do the shows as a film?

Rick: No, I never would.

Gwendoline: [Laughs] Why not?

Rick: There is no risk in a film, while shows are a whole different story. Throughout the history of the world, people have needed to gather together to share a moment of beauty. That’s not just runway shows; it’s raves and rock concerts; it’s church; it’s a voguing ball. That is never going to go away. People adorn themselves to communicate with each other, to signal who they are or – just as valid – who they want to be. As you get older, you decide who you want to be and you turn into that. Clothes are one of the first steps. When you meet somebody, you can make an effort to charm or put up a wall. Runway shows are a presentation of those ideas, now more than ever, because fashion has become so saturated, like you had to do more and more and more. Some people do more with huge sets and by making things more sumptuous and extravagant; other people do more by talking about elements of beauty that we might have overlooked or not thought about for a while. With the runway show, there is also the commercial element; you are talking about survival in a very primitive sense. You are talking about a risk, a gamble, and watching somebody throw a dice. That is compelling – you are all there to witness something that could go right or go wrong. It could be thrilling or just dull. All of these elements are compelling. A video of a show is never going to have that thrill because it is all edited and controlled.

Gwendoline: The reason your shows are so startling, is that they go beyond theatre. There is such a primal element to them. You speak in a raw, honest and distilled way, which communicates a vital element of human experience. I have felt like I was witnessing a ritual; it had a feeling of paganism and a hymn-like quality. The last show was like being transported into another dimension of thrills and excitement.

Rick: Everything that you are saying is so lovely. Thank you for recognizing these things, because those shows are autobiographical. We are all concerned with the same things and beneath it all is insecurity, survival, fulfilment, self-loathing, self-criticism. I am just talking about my personal experiences, but everybody is thinking about those things, so if anything strikes a chord, it is simply that I am speaking to those insecurities, uncertainties and hopes.

I've been very lucky with staying independent. I've had fantastic partners from the start. My CEO, Elsa [Lanzo], and her partner, Luca [Ruggeri], have been with me for 18 years, and they are more talented in navigating the industry than I am at creating clothes. It is a difficult road to negotiate. There are people like Dries Van Noten who I think has long been the CEO of his company, but I don't know how he does it. He is a genius.

Gwendoline: Getting the right manufacturer, positioning and stores, and the right kind of press – that is a balancing act. Designing is one brain, but all that is something else. They don't teach you that at design school.

Rick: They can't; it's a talent. Design schools can't even teach you how to be a designer, but they do put you into a community of people who want to be creative. There is competition and energy, and then you grow up in an industry and maybe help each other out at some point. But no one can teach you to be a designer – you just are or you're not. It's the same thing with CEOs. It is a poetic talent, as poetic as being a designer. I was just lucky to have people who protect what I do. I respect what they do, so I hope they are getting as much out of this as I am.

Gwendoline: Those guardians who recognize and protect talent are so important. There are very few.

Rick: Did you have that?

Gwendoline: I am very lucky. I have worked and work with some really wonderful people, but what I have learned is that I have to take responsibility entirely for myself. I can't say to someone else, 'Please protect me' – because no one will. And I have had to view that as a kind of expansion of self, to be able to say 'no', or 'I want this', or 'I want something else'. Rather than just saying 'yes' because of the fear that comes from thinking you might not work again. I have understood that I have to be my own guardian. I can leave myself vulnerable and raw in the work, but the rest of the time, it has to be a different mindset. It is a blessed relief and freedom to be open and transparent in the work.

Rick: On *Game of Thrones*, for example, I suppose that someone – maybe the director or the producer – was your CEO. They created a support structure so you could do your job and you trusted them to do it. Are you working with Michael Kaplan?[3]

Gwendoline: Yes, I have worked with Michael Kaplan, and I love him. Of course, you know Michael.

Rick: He is an old, old friend from LA; he is family.

Gwendoline: I love all of his work. His work with Bob Mackie and on *Blade Runner* and just about every single iconic film that you love and has meant something to you. He has become a dear friend and I have been looking at his photos as he goes on walks around Los Angeles. He has been peering into the Chateau Marmont and taking photos…

Rick: I don't really do Instagram.

Gwendoline: Can I ask about that? I know you have the app. I was checking, and I thought, 'Oh, someone else must be doing that for him. I don't believe that Rick Owens goes on Instagram.'

Rick: I do every once in a while; I don't follow many people. I follow Michèle [Lamy].

Gwendoline: How is Michèle?

Rick: She is good. I don't know where she is… on the other side of the house.

Gwendoline: I saw something with her demonstrating some really amazing pelvic flexibility.

Rick: We have been doing our moves. No, I love my Rick Owens Online Instagram account, and I am very attentive to that. I do consider what we put up. I work with Luke from my office on all of the visuals, but it isn't the spontaneous personal thing it probably is supposed to be. It is very curated; it is very thought out. I don't want it to get too commercial, but I don't want to ignore that, and I don't want to get too impersonal, but I don't want to get overly personal. I mean, everybody curates and presents the story of who they want to be. So it's a little formal and it's a little bit uptight, but that is kind of who I am. I'm not the most spontaneous guy; I don't blurt things out that much. But I will check out Kaplan's Instagram.

Gwendoline: He is a real dream. And, of course, you know Anne Crawford.[4]

Rick: Oh, Anne is perfect.

Gwendoline: Isn't she? Anne sent you photographs of me in the store in LA trying on things and shopping and getting really over excited, and she's, like, 'I've got to a send a picture to Rick!' She is a dream. Giles has known her for years and he said to me, 'There is someone in LA you've got meet.' One day we did and I feel like I fell in love with her. She is the most fun.

Rick: She is perfect. She is elegant and raunchy and fun and real.

'Joseph Beuys is the reason I dropped out of art school. I could never get to his level, so I just gave up and became a fashion designer instead.'

Gwendoline: And just naughty. Recently, I was at the San Vicente Bungalows, and she bowled in wearing a red leather jumpsuit with cherry-red boots and I nearly screamed because I so wanted that jumpsuit. She looked incredible with her old Hollywood curls, and she was just being phenomenal. She is very motherly towards to me, and almost nobody other than Anne is, and I very happily submit. She spoils me rotten. How did you meet her?

Rick: She used to work with Michèle's ex-husband, 20-something years ago. And I used to work for Michèle and so we just knew each other from that group and we all just kind of grew up together. She used to be a journalist in LA and she would come over. She also has perfect tits, and I was working on these cups for a bra kind of thing, so I used to fondle her tits a lot.

Gwendoline: [Laughs] Haven't we all!

Rick: She's so elegant, and elegantly knows how to enjoy life. Just her happiness. She's sensible and reckless…

Gwendoline: All at the same time. I really like her; I feel like I have permission when I am with her.

Rick: That's a good way of putting it. That's a really nice thing to say about someone and it's true.

Gwendoline: Do you think of this as a pause before things resume as they were, or will things change?

Rick: There will be a change. Isn't that great? There will have to be. I was wondering when something like this was going to come along. I've always been a pessimist. How can it be with all of this, with so many people and so much discord, how come we haven't reached some kind of crisis before? I mean, how come there hasn't been a world war? We are a generation that has never really had that kind of threat. Well, here it is. It's happened, a different kind of war. War brings out the best and the worst in people, and things happen after wars and people adjust. I don't mean to trivialize, but I was thinking about fashion, and after World War II, Dior's New Look hit the right chord because there had been such a long period of deprivation and people were ready to rejoice in sumptuousness. This is going to be different: we are not going to feel entitled to sumptuousness. We have been through that kind of careless consumption in the past few years; like, 'Let's put this plaid coat over this floral, and let's put on a crown and jewellery and platforms.' There has been this casual consumption, which I found amusing at first. I thought people were enjoying themselves and it was fun. But with me there is always this puritan thinking that I prefer things to be more focused and a bit more chosen. I can appreciate the careless 'I threw everything on' kind of thing, but there is something disrespectful about… I mean, I am just a fuddy-duddy. I can only handle one thing at a time. It is a new generation. This generation is absorbing information in a very different way. It is thrilling, the way that it has changed in our lifetimes, but with our evolution, people are just absorbing a lot more. I don't want to be the disapproving old guy, but this constant consumption… This is what this is all about in some ways. The word responsibility is used more than it was 10 years ago, and that is such a good thing. I'm in an industry… I mean, I have polluted more rivers than anybody, probably, so my authority on anything about conservation is from a cesspit. But it's not specifically sustainability that I think is exciting; it is the idea of responsibility and change. If someone like me can start thinking about responsibility more than I did 10 years ago, that is a tiny change. It's a baby step, but in the right direction. I am talking about sustainability in my business and in what I do and what I promote. It can come off as virtue signalling, as hype, but so what? That's good hype! I'm doing my best. It's not easy to change your life.

Gwendoline: And to change your suppliers and all of that is not as easy as people think either.

Rick: But the point is – you start somewhere. Instead of being like, 'It's too overwhelming, I can't do it', you take baby steps and then the people after you will take further steps and it will make a change. So that is what I am excited about, about this new conversation on responsibility and sustainability. You know, it might be too late, but it kind of doesn't matter. The whole point is that we can all do better. That's the whole point of life. I mean, you grow as you get older, and you just want to get better, you want to do better, get better, be better, think better. You never get a prize at the end, but the glory is in making the effort and the movement forward.

Gwendoline: Everybody is going to be craving life…

Rick: …and quality.

Gwendoline: It's what Vivienne [Westwood] has been saying for such a long time – choose wisely, buy less.

'People always need to gather together to share a moment of beauty. Runway shows, raves, rock concerts, church, voguing balls. It's never going away.'

> **‘Manufacturing, press, positioning, stores – it’s a balancing act. Designing is one brain; all that is something else. And they don’t teach it at school.’**

Rick: I totally agree with that and that is what I hope will be the mood after a life lesson like this, for all of us.

Gwendoline: Is it true that you wake up to Alla Nazimova in *Salomé*?

Rick: It is one of the movies I wake up to. I do watch a lot of silent movies from the 1920s just because visually they are so beautiful and they put me in the right mood. Looking at something so old helps put things into perspective, like my aesthetic decisions of the day. It’s all been done in this long line of creative expression. It makes me feel insignificant, but also a little reckless. You’re following a tradition of creative expression and you’re a miniscule part of it, so don’t take yourself so seriously. You can afford to be reckless. Who cares?

Gwendoline: That is often when the best things come about, when you stop self-censoring. Where are you now? I want to see everything.

Rick: OK, this is my office…

Gwendoline: Oh, wow! Are those ideas there on the table? What’s that?

Rick: This is pre-collection, some stuff on the pre-collection.

Gwendoline: Any more shoulders?

Rick: Oh, always. I am going to be milking those shoulders for a long time.

Gwendoline: I love a pagoda shoulder.

Rick: I haven’t really figured out the timing on shoulders like that, because they are about defiance and a certain amount of humour. Yet there is also an earnest search for heroism in that kind of silhouette, like, a superman. When I did this retrospective in Milan, I called it *Subhuman, Inhuman, Superhuman*, which relates to Nietzsche’s philosophy. I don’t read that much philosophy, but it sounded right to me. We consider ourselves subhuman or inhuman or superhuman. I am talking to our insecurities and inadequacies, which you gradually learn to deal with; you learn how to make up for them and forgive yourself.

Gwendoline: And how to capitalize on the inadequacies, and build on them.

Rick: Accept them instead of trying to force yourself to be someone you are not. You learn how to balance them out and make yourself a better person. That is what those shoulders mean! [Laughs]

Gwendoline: Jerry Stafford, who I work with – a wonderful friend and collaborator, stylist, just a phenomenal person – showed me this look, and I said I’d definitely wear it. I love it, but I was scared because it is an aspect of me that I feel inhibited about. Often what I feel inhibited about, I will enhance.

Rick: Accentuate the obvious!

Gwendoline: Always! As Leigh Bowery said, if you’ve got a spot, put a big red ring around it.

Gwendoline: Do you have a pool there?

Rick: Oh, no!

Gwendoline: I imagine that your house is sort of endless, into the sky and down into the earth. Somehow parts of it are like *Metropolis* and parts of it are like…

Rick: This is this weird garage space, which we use for dinner parties. It’s like this super huge hallway when you enter, then there is this room we use a lot, where we eat, and hang out.

Gwendoline: I love this. What’s on the wall there?

Rick: That one is a mural by Michèle’s daughter, Scarlett Rouge, who’s an artist. I asked her to do that for Michèle as a surprise one time. And then those are some marble sculptures by Barry X Ball.

Gwendoline: Are those wires connected to the heads?

Rick: They’re hanging. And this room has these wonderful skylights.

Gwendoline: Where do you work out?

Rick: I’ve never put a gym in this house because I need to leave. A gym gets me out – walking through the Tuileries to the other side of the river. If I had a gym in the house I would never leave.

Gwendoline: You would have everything you needed at home.

Rick: That part was added on in the 1950s, but this is the 19th-century part. This is the office, and there are some big pictures of Michèle, and this is kind of a storage room. Then this is the administration office on the *étage noble* of the building. It overlooks the square.

Gwendoline: The proportions! Oh, can I see the square; it is so beautiful.

Rick: Yeah, and that’s the Assemblée Nationale, which is the… I don’t know, it’s a civic thing. I am trying to remember what it is…

Gwendoline: [Laughs really hard]

Rick: It will come to me. It’s where all of the congressmen go. Congressmen?

Gwendoline: Is it like parliament?

Rick: Yeah, it’s like parliament.

Gwendoline: You can keep an eye on what’s happening, which isn’t much at the moment. Is that a sculpture or a monkey?

Rick: It’s a monkey, a painting by a Yugoslavian art group. I never come in this room actually, because it is admin. I didn’t take this room because it was too grand for me, and I didn’t like it overlooking the square; it would be too distracting. My office is at the back of the house, overlooking the Ministry of Defence’s garden. It’s just trees; it’s just beautiful trees. I’ll show you in a second.

Gwendoline: And where is the pool?

Rick: I’m a beach guy, I’m not a pool guy.

Gwendoline: You’re a beach guy?

Rick: You see that’s the garden of the Ministry of Defence from our terrace. We have all that green. It is very peaceful and so insulated up here; it is hard to believe that we are in the middle of the city. What was it you said about Anne that was so nice?

Gwendoline: That she gives you permission.

Rick: Well, you are one of those people.

Gwendoline: Oh, bless you. That is really lovely of you.

Rick: You’re very easy.

Gwendoline: Anne has this farm in Ojai that sounds phenomenal. I think she has something insane like 600 acres there with turtles and flying zebras and prehistoric animals. She’s got dolphins swimming. She’s got everything.[5]

Rick: Oh, wow. Where are you going next? What is your next project?

Gwendoline: No, I don’t know. I have got some things that I am working on. Not to be flippant about it, but I decided I’d worked a lot, really consistently – and I love working a lot and travelling all of the time – but I had to recharge. I needed some space to find what I wanted to say next. That is another reason why I love you, because of these ideas of exploring different forms of beauty. I wanted some time to think about what that is now. Not necessarily in a literal way, but in the ideas I want to explore next. Money is wonderful because it creates options, but you also have to feel truly fulfilled and stretched. I like to feel scared, and I like there to be an element of shock. Extravagance means lots of different things to me creatively and that’s what I’d like again. So I am working with some writers to create things, and I’m talking with some directors and we’re starting to generate things. There are a couple of people, who I truly love and who enjoy subverting… I mean, I love mainstream things, I love big mainstream movies and the idea of me being in that environment still shocks and entertains me. I don’t think it will ever stop entertaining me. I haven’t stopped working, but I’m working in a different way – not travelling and filming all of the time, or modelling, which is my real passion. [Laughs] So, this period is allowing me to take that pause, and already I feel like I have more life in me. I have done a lot more hard physical exercise, too, which I always think is good for grounding and getting in touch with your essence. Just going through that process and that change; they are all things I feel excited about. At best, I am halfway through my life and I want to feel that I am fully inhabiting it. Particularly in the context of the way the world is now.

Rick: You have got a lot done already, so it will be exciting to see what is coming next. But what you’ve done is already fantastic.

Gwendoline: Thank you, Rick, thank you. I can’t wait to see your next show.

Rick: Whenever that is! We will find an excuse for people to come together.

Gwendoline: And to experience something.

Rick: Together, because that is one of the most primal urges on the planet, for everyone to gather and to hold hands and to feel something.

Gwendoline: It’s so wonderful to speak to you. Thank you for speaking to me.

Rick: My pleasure. I don’t go to London any more, but when you come to Paris, you know how to find me. We’re easy; we’re very homely, so if you want to come by for dinner or something, then just invite yourself.

Gwendoline: I will; I would really love that. Give my love to Michèle.

Rick: And give my love to Giles.

Gwendoline: I will. So much love to you, Rick. Stay well, take care. Bye.

Rick: Bye.

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1. Rick Owens and Michèle Lamy live and work at 7 bis Place du Palais Bourbon in Paris’s seventh *arrondissement*. From 1975 to 1980, the building was the headquarters of the French Socialist Party.

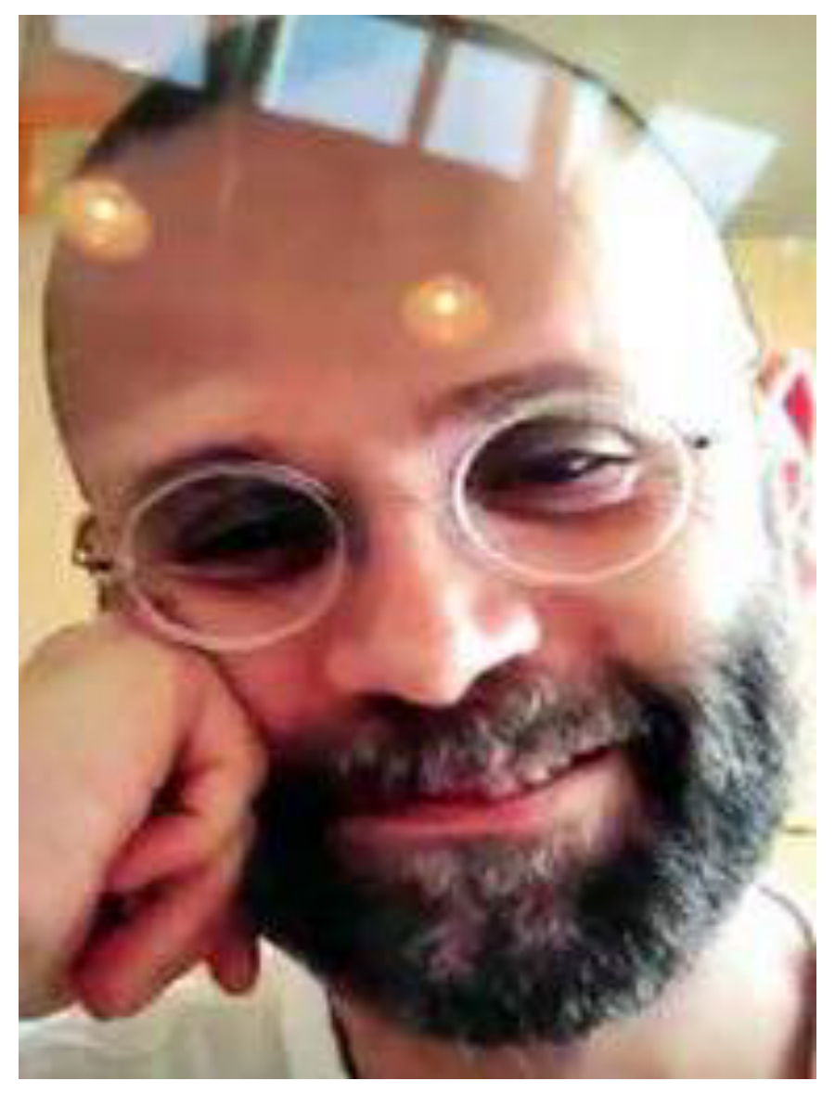
2. In 2019, Rick Owens collaborated with Moncler on a clothing capsule collection and a specially designed ‘brutalist’ matte-black tour bus, which echoed the interiors of Owens’ Parisian home. The couple travelled on the bus from Los Angeles to Garden Valley, Nevada – via Las Vegas – to visit artist Michael Heizer’s monumental land-art piece, *City*. En route, they listened to Gesaffelstein and Lamy’s band Lavascar.

3. Michael Kaplan is a costume designer who began his career on *Blade Runner* in 1982. He has since worked on over 40 projects, including the three most recent *Star Wars* films, *Fight Club*, and *National Lampoon’s Winter Holiday*.

4. Anne Crawford is Rick Owens’ Los Angeles ambassador. In 2016, she told website guestofaguest.com that her alter ego was Michèle Lamy and that her motto was: ‘Too much of good thing can be wonderful.’

5. It has proved impossible to verify the exact inventory of Crawford’s Californian menagerie.

Pierpaolo Piccioli and Angelo Flaccavento



‘In times of doubt, uncertainty and darkness, it is independent thought that provides the keys to new beginnings.’

Pierpaolo Piccioli and Angelo Flaccavento in conversation, 10 April 2020.

Angelo Flaccavento: Where are you right now? How do you structure your days?

Pierpaolo Piccioli: I am at my house in Nettuno with my wife, Simona, and our three kids. These are really intense days, full of video calls. I’m keeping the work going: we are working on the collections on paper, the drawings for all the collections and menswear, couture and pre-collections. When I am not on video calls, I draw and paint. I have several work teams, and so I am active on many fronts with many collaborators. I realize, too, that at this moment a lot of people are orbiting around me, so I try to be as present as possible with everyone; I don’t want them to feel destabilized. I am aware of this responsibility: to be there, to be the centre, to try to be enthusiastic and give everyone a bit of energy.

Angelo: Do you find that you have to be a cross between a team coach and an emotional punchbag?

‘I saw this ad with a guy and a girl eating pizza over a digital connection. The slogan, ‘Distant but close’, pissed me off, because it’s just not the same.’

Pierpaolo: Certainly. You can’t ask people – and I never have – to do only clothing. I have always tried to share broader thoughts on how to approach the collections. So being together, sharing difficulties and physical closeness makes it easier to talk and give life to it all. Now it’s a little more difficult due to the distances involved, and these distances need to be filled, by force, with chats, and shared elements and images in order to express an array of sensations. It’s also about how we confront this moment, because I know that many members of the teams are very stressed. You might be working on jackets, bags or overcoats, and not having a vision of the bigger picture or where we are headed can be alienating. So by necessity, I am also an emotional punchbag for everyone because I want to tell everyone what is happening and get them involved. I have to say that, right now, I can feel the unity in the company. I feel that everyone is really present and has a desire to belong to something. I really feel that everyone has a sense of belonging and I like that a lot.

Angelo: Are there times at the moment when you lose your patience or get angry? I am asking this out of experience. Yesterday, I was watching television and I saw this ad with a guy and a girl eating a pizza together over a digital connection, and the ad’s slogan ‘Distant but close’ really pissed me off, because it’s just not the same. We are living this reality right now, and it’s just not the same.

Pierpaolo: No, there aren’t any angry moments within the workplace. Outside, there is the goody-goody thought going around that ‘we all needed this moment to reflect’; it’s not true. I didn’t feel this need to reflect. It was very clear to me where we were headed, and I have always tried to follow that path, even if at times it has been difficult because of the market or because the rest of the world said otherwise. The other day, in fact, I spoke about how I think that in the past two decades humanity – the artist, in particular – has become decentralized relative to marketing. In the art world, for example, gallery owners have become almost more central than the artists themselves. In music, producers are more central than musicians. In fashion, CEOs and marketing are more central than the designers. This does not work. It is a system that has no future, and today more than ever it is a reality that all of us have to confront. For me, I have never thought about changing the way I do things when the rules of the game change. I have always played the game this way, so, in that sense, ‘let’s all reflect and we’ll all be better people’ bothers me; I don’t believe it. I think those who are incapable of creating fashion will remain incapable of creating fashion; those who have placed marketing at the centre of their companies will not change. I do believe that it is the moment for a new humanism, though: we need to put humanity back in the centre of the value system. We’ve lost that, to a certain degree, haven’t we? Don’t we seem to be living in a kind of Middle Ages? Certainly, times are very different. Nowadays, we don’t talk about centuries, we talk about months. But it does seem like the dark period before the Renaissance, but before we get to the Renaissance, there is humanism. The Renaissance is the artistic production of humanism. It is its consequence. Humanism comes before everything: a return to certain values and the placement of humans at the centre. And, in reality, even a large company like ours has to be managed with a personal, genuine and authentic approach.

Angelo: Do you think that would be hard to achieve? How can humanity be placed back at the centre when the fashion machine has become so gigantic?

Pierpaolo: First, I think we need to put creativity at the centre. We need to talk once again about the unspoken rules that are already in place, because in order to change the game you need to demolish it from the inside. The storytelling and all that other bullshit have simply been packaging content that has been disappearing, which then makes their existence senseless. We need to return to content, which has to fit the way it is communicated. If they don’t correspond, it will be a problem. This is imperative. The public wants to be moved: everyone understands that there is no need to own yet another anonymous object. When you hear ‘distant but close’, it’s saying that people are fundamental. People are what’s missing. I don’t think that we will want another object that’s the same as the ones already in our wardrobes just because the price tag and logo are different. I think we will need objects that move us. I don’t know if this will really happen because the market is governed by certain rules, but it always has been and will continue to be so.

Angelo: How do you situate yourself in relation to change and being forced to change perspective? Is it something to be suffered or does it excite, stimulate and surprise you?

‘It’s like being on a desert island, having to decide what you want to hang on to. This period could help to define identity, redefine the essence of things.’

Pierpaolo: I have always found a change of perspective to be stimulating. Our company is not used to having as big a budget as some others. We are a big company, but not big enough to travel around the world with a thousand people for a show, so we are kind of used to working with smaller budgets and situations. Right now though, the situation has *really* changed. It’s no longer just a question of budget, so that aspect stimulates me; it’s interesting. At the moment, for example, it is clear that we will need to immediately approach things in a different way: the advertising campaigns, couture and the runway shows. After months of isolation and social distancing, it may be July or September before we return to runway shows with 1,000, 2,000 or 8,000 people all together in a room. We need to come up with other means and formats that are not just a surrogate of what was. I don’t like nostalgia; I like to conceive of things in a different way. A real change of perspective.

Angelo: I have noticed in your working process that the moment of thought coincides with the act of drawing. It is not a common approach among creative directors nowadays who, in general, hand down ideas that are then developed by others. Yours is a truly humanistic approach because it is tied to the classic working process of art: drawing as the basis for everything.

Pierpaolo: Drawing is the starting point for me – put something on paper and it stays there. Yes, it’s true that I’ve done that in moments of change in my personal life, too. Like for my first solo runway show as a creative director, when I started drawing with a pencil again because it’s an instrument that helps me think, reflect and be alone. It allows me to get to the bottom of things. That is to say, throwing off operational concerns in order to be able to think in a free manner, allowing thoughts to flow, feeling things through in a much more fluid way, without preconceptions or strategies. This is, in fact, the way I am confronting this moment; my haute-couture ideas, for example, come from there, from drawing differently, while thinking of diverse things and media. So yes, the drawing is always a bit of a new departure for everything, because it is a way of starting over again *from within myself.* It helps me to think, reflect, and be by myself. It’s like a personal stream of consciousness.

Angelo: Is drawing something you always do or is it characteristic of transitional moments?

Pierpaolo: I draw in any case; I always draw. But I draw with a particular passion in moments when I need to think on my own, above all, if an important change is happening. I have been thinking about this recently; finding myself alone in the position of creative director was in fact a moment of great change, and I started drawing to try to find the sense in it. In that moment, I probably had to understand what I wanted to keep as a basis for starting over. And it’s the same now, to some extent. It’s just that this change isn’t personal; it’s clearly more general, but I am living it a bit like a moment of great change and relaunching. It’s like being on a desert island and having to decide what I want to hang on to, don’t you think? I think this period could help to define identity, help to redefine the essence of things. Drawing in this quest is one of the things that helps me the most because I am able to clearly visualize what could be an image, a vision that should bring many other things along with it. It is a way of thinking.

Angelo: I imagine that going from the big studio in the Palazzo Mignanelli [Valentino headquarters in Rome] that you have all to yourself, to your home – a big house, certainly, but with your whole family there – has been a big change. Are you able to make time and space for yourself or is there some struggle involved?

Pierpaolo: No, not at all. I am able to find my spaces, because I am always outside in the garden. I stay outside where I have my little drawing table that I set up and take down every day. I have this kind of tray that I bring with me from place to place. So every time we eat outdoors we disassemble everything and put it somewhere else.

‘I think there’ll be new, radical ideas that’ll change reality. During humanism, the post-war era and the punk period, it wasn’t money that changed reality.’

Angelo: Are you experiencing these moments as a kind of back-to-basics, focusing on the things that are truly important?

Pierpaolo: Absolutely. But those kind of life choices had already started. I can’t say that this is a departure; I had already set out along this path for other reasons. Maybe because I am managing the same company in a different way or because the market changes, or perhaps because I don’t agree with certain market rules that don’t align with my way of thinking and for which I had already decided to change direction. If anything, this is a way of reaching a point where we can be sharper and more precise about certain ideas.

Angelo: Thinking about that idea of starting off again from the concept of uniformity, the collection you presented in March feels almost like it was a premonition of things to come. From the collections I saw this season, I found two to be prophetic: yours for its reset to a common clothing language, for both for men and women, and Marni because there was that idea of escapism, like going to a rave in a crack in the pavement and coming out all glittery. I know this sounds silly, but you creative people have antennae that pick up on tiny particles. You couldn’t have known that this would happen, but all the same you were onto that line of thought. There was already something in you that was pushing in a new direction.

Pierpaolo: Without a doubt, I was already totally convinced that the only thing that mattered were emotions. I wanted to start by resetting the barriers of thoughts and forms that had become redundant. I wanted to take everything away in order to arrive at that reset: a new departure equal for everyone, and tied only to people; the diversity of individuals in their depth, not necessarily in their form. Every time I think about a collection I don’t think about the clothes I want to make, but rather what I want to tell. And I make clothing that best expresses the story I want to tell, that best manifests that idea within the limits of certain rules. After all, *Le Blanc*, the September collection, was to some extent the same thing in another form. The idea of using uniform to glorify diversity was already there: using a white shirt, a universal element, in order to talk about individuality. I think that I was more extreme in March. I sort of like that extremism. I think that at this moment you must be more extreme to be more incisive.

Angelo: Absolutely. Do you think that these times call for a new radicalism? I can’t wait until it all becomes more radical.

Pierpaolo: Me, too. I think that there is a need for a new radicalism, for taking precise stands and offering clear perspectives, unequivocal points of view. In times of great doubt, uncertainty and darkness, it is independent thought that creates change and provides the keys to new beginnings. There are no rules to this, and so intuition, ideas and creativity will surely count for more. When there are rules, some people are better at following them than others, so the rules end up making the system. When the rules are no longer valid, ideas and creativity take the lead. So, yes, I think that there will be new, radical ideas that will change reality. During humanism, the post-war era and the punk period, it wasn’t money that changed reality. Neorealism grew out of a desire and an urgency to say something, not from a production company that decided to invest in, I don’t know, young Italian directors. It was a hunger for expression, an urgency that should be the principal input of any art form. Independent thought will be worth more than uniform thought.

Angelo: Do you think it will be possible to maintain that sort of independence for a while? Even if you don’t envision a necessarily radiant future, which seems a rather silly prospect. That ‘let’s care about each other’ line is rather rhetorical.

Pierpaolo: Exactly. Because, even if we try to imagine a radiant future, it’s obvious that the longer this situation drags on the more it will be difficult to recover economically. I feel a certain responsibility for a company with 5,000 employees resting on my shoulders; a lot of people depend upon my work. I do not live in my little world with my flowers and scented candles, not thinking about what will happen. I do think about it, and it’s important that, in this historic moment, I react, accepting my responsibilities, while being distracted by the weight of it. My work consists of both delivering a kind of dream, and having the ability to reflect on practical questions. Creating a kind of empathy with people will be fundamental, and so I don’t think it is a question of dreaming of radiant futures or of being a goody-goody, but rather a question of trying to impart lightness, of not being too weighed down by this historic moment. It is such a difficult moment.

‘I feel responsibility for the 5,000 employees resting on my shoulders. I don’t live in my own world of scented candles, not thinking about what’ll happen.’

Angelo: Does your interest in the individual make you a humanist? Humanism is a trait tied to our Italian culture. How would you talk about that today to someone who had not shared it from birth? And how can you apply such a thought, based on classical culture, to making fashion?

Pierpaolo: Humanism is talked about in relation to art workshops, and, in my mind, the haute-couture atelier is a kind of art workshop, a wholly Italian tradition in which the maestro teaches the assistant. They weren’t called teams, as such, but that’s what they were. At work I have a team, and there is a team in the atelier. These are art workshops, too; it’s just that in Italy, unfortunately, the tradition of these workshops has been lost. That’s why fashion has become the story of single designers, with scented candles and flowers, without a team, without people around. I have always respected everyone’s work and this is something that I think is evident, as a matter of practice, not rhetoric. I think that everyone’s work is fundamental to the process. That is a part of the art workshop that we have lost in Italy. The French appropriated this because, as we can see, the embroiderers in French *maisons* such as Lemarié or Lesage have themselves become companies. They are almost brands due to the emphasis they put on the art-workshop model. But the model is actually an Italian tradition and I want, as I have done and will continue to do, to restore our Italian art-workshop tradition in the collections and in fashion. It is a matter of culture, not just craft. I don’t like the idea of high fashion as merely, ‘How many hours? How much does it cost?’ If someone is good it can take them five minutes. It’s not a question of how much time it takes, but of talent, culture and know-how in rendering an idea. I’m not interested in technicalities. I have never been interested in the solely technical aspect of production. What concerns me is what comes out of it. Above all, I am interested in how the most complicated thing to create is often something that seems simple, as if it comes directly from the sketch. The whole process must hide the effort required to arrive at that kind of lightness. If it doesn’t, it is simply production and the representation of something technical. In my opinion, that’s not interesting. Fashion must be magical, meaning you aspire towards a dream in which you forget about the effort, the months of work, the cost, and enter into a moment in which you create empathy, and, through a piece of clothing, make contact with people. It becomes a kind of passport through which others are able to project themselves. Otherwise, it simply becomes virtuosity and know-how, and I am not interested in that. Infusing a company with the art-workshop culture in a society that, in theory, has a more digital logic is a whole other ball game. I believe that humanness is still felt, the human touch is still perceived when it is present.

Angelo: Do you think that the human touch will become ever more important, given how we have lost it in this digital distancing?

Pierpaolo: I think so. Very much so. It is what I think all of us will want more than anything.

Angelo: Humanism places individuals at the centre of every value system, and therefore calibrates everything based on their needs. How does this differ from unrestrained self-centredness?

Pierpaolo: Humanism is the opposite of self-centredness. It gives value to teamwork, not to dictators and big egos. I think ideas and creativity and the whole process of arriving at that outcome should be put at the centre. This moment in time is the total negation of the concept of ‘lifestyle’. For decades, ‘lifestyle’ has been the catchword to describe cool stuff. Lifestyle is just a group of people who have objects in common – cars, clothing, haircuts, everything – but *community* is the exact opposite. It is a group of people who share values, not objects. Today, humanism means creating community, sharing values and placing those values at the centre of the system. It doesn't mean owning the same lamp or having a vacation home in the same place. It means being in different places on earth, like we are now, and united around ideas. I don't believe that we really see one another on Instagram or on FaceTime to show each other how we all own the same lamp, because if you have it, fine, if you don't, no problem. You come together if you have something to say, if you have shared values.

Angelo: You often associate humanism with punk. Whether they are in London, Melbourne or Busto Arsizio, punks all have an oppositional attitude towards the mainstream.

Pierpaolo: For me, punk means just that. It's the first subculture to be born anarchically, isn't it? I mean, as a result of independent thinking, and, in my opinion, independent thinkers are by necessity tied to the concept of humanism. Not identifying one's self with tags or pigeonholes, and being beyond any constrictions is a way of being punk. Punk is the first movement to disregard gender. There isn't a punk woman or a punk man; there's just punk. That's it. If you think of the mods, there were mods and modettes – there was always a gender distinction, but punk was the first movement to dispose of that idea of gender. I think it's tied to the concept of humanism for its independence of thought – getting rid of gender and pigeonholes, throwing stuff off – because at the end of the day punk is not tied to lifestyle but to the idea of community. All subcultures are born like this. They are forms of culture that, in some way, are born outside of urban centres, right? Subcultures have always changed the decades that followed their inception, the successive fashion, art or other artistic forms that followed.

Angelo: Do you think that new subcultures will be born in this climate? It has been said for years that digital culture has nullified the possibility of new subcultures appearing because it has eliminated the distinction between mainstream and underground, and that everything is immediately pushed onto the scene.

Pierpaolo: I don't know if new subcultures will be born. They certainly won't be as easily decoded as punk, mods or other subcultures, because people nowadays are connected. After all, punk and all the pre-digital cultures needed aesthetic codes in order to be recognizable, but today you don't need an aesthetic code to set yourself apart. The forms of recognition can be the photos you publish on social media or the kind of music you listen to. You don't need to dress in black or put on spikes in order to say, 'I'm like you.' We recognize one another by other means, from what we have already chosen. That it will probably make it more difficult to decipher the communities that are formed and will be formed.

Angelo: Your work, Pierpaolo, even in its most radical expressions, such as in the latest runway show, always retains an almost palpable lightness as its defining, ineffable trait. In the past you've said, 'Lightness is not simplicity nor is it simplistic.' Does reaching the point of weightlessness call for a process that is, at times, much more complex?

Pierpaolo: I think of simplicity as an arrival point; it is never a point of departure. If you begin simply, you will never arrive. That is to say, you risk superficiality. Simplicity is when you are able to resolve great complexity in such a way that it is no longer felt, as if you arrived there from nothing, when in reality it emerges from a great depth of knowledge, which makes it the opposite of simplicity. This is how I am. You go on a quest for the essential, which doesn't mean removing complexity, but rather resolving and accepting it. And so you get to the essence, made up of a balance of procedures, of personal and professional choices, that give you an identity.

Angelo: Is that an effort for you? Is it complex work?

Pierpaolo: I am, by nature, complex, [laughs] so it is inevitable for me. In order to make myself understood by others I need to resolve complexity and get to the essentials. I have always been like that, so resolving and unravelling are daily exercises. I work with others, with ateliers, trying to explain to them what I want to express, and not just tell them to make a centimetre more or less here or there, or how many flaps I want on a piece of clothing. I try to explain to them why it is important to share a final vision with everyone, because the more it is shared the more focused the final picture will be. By necessity, I have had to try to resolve the daily complexities in order to talk with others, because you have to decode yourself so that others can understand you.

> **'Punk was the first movement to disregard gender. It's not punk woman or punk man; it's just punk. It's not tied to lifestyle but to the idea of community.'**

Angelo: Does this lightness also find expression outside of work?

Pierpaolo: By now, yes.

Angelo: Is that an accomplishment?

Pierpaolo: Yes, it is. Of course, like all accomplishments, it's something that you can lose from one day to the next, as you well know, so you need to remember constantly how long it took to achieve, so you must stay the course.

Angelo: Absolutely. Reflecting on the conditions of dislocation that we're living in today, I thought about the fact that we both come from provincial backgrounds. You have this routine of commuting back and forth from Nettuno to Rome, and I am from an island. Rome, by now, structurally speaking, is almost on the outskirts of the fashion system. But at times the provincial point of view is more useful, because it is as if things are seen from a distance, so that you can more easily distinguish weaknesses and strengths.

Pierpaolo: It's important to have both a very distanced perspective and a very close-up, internal point of view that takes in detail. My dislocation is, in fact, part of my history; I grew up here and everything was always far away. The world seemed unreachable and distant. I never thought I would arrive at having all this in my life, which is why today I don't want to fall into the stereotype of someone who has always lived like this. I like this dislocation and I want to maintain it. When I was little, it allowed me to imagine things in a certain way without actually seeing them, and the gap between my imagination and reality was the space where I cultivated my creativity and formed my creative identity. That gap formed my way of thinking and today it allows me to be different from other people. It allows me to think in a different way and not get trapped in stereotypes. As a creative director, I like to be distant. Dislocation keeps things in movement. It offers me the chance to be more elastic.

Angelo: You've maintained an awareness of where you come from and what you have achieved, so there's no sense of condescension or the kind of satisfaction that can lead to smugness.

Pierpaolo: I think that self-indulgence blocks growth. I am never satisfied, not totally, so the mistakes in the last collection are always the starting point for the next. When I think that a collection is perfect, I look for the error from which to begin again. And I always find it! [Laughs] I am convinced that my way of working is honest, direct, clear, and close to who I really am. I would never accept compromises just so that I can work. I didn't do that when I was 20 or 30; that never interested me. We are fortunate to do this work. I am fortunate because I seized an opportunity, but I have always worked in a serious and honest way. I have always thought more about the work than what it could give me. I don't want to play the dumb designer, but fundamentally I am not interested in the economic aspect of this work, and, in some way, that allows me to be free. I am not an art collector; I don't have 10 paintings in my house, so I don't need the 11th and be forced to have to do this job. Fundamentally, I could do this work somewhere else in the world, in another way, because I don't feel tied to that economic aspect.

Angelo: Do you often look back at your past or do you always move forward?

Pierpaolo: I always move forward, but I always want to be aware of the steps I have already taken. I think that Nietzsche's idea of oblivion, to be aware of the past while forgetting it when you need to confront the future, is my way of moving forward without being tied to and weighed down by the past. Your past does define you; that's why I want to look at the past and know who I am and that I am not rootless. You don't get far with rootlessness.

Angelo: In this period we all have more time to contemplate and that can be a little bit scary. Has this moment made you think about any particular aspect of your journey, some junction that has defined you?

Pierpaolo: Yes, but I must also say that my approach is to confront that every day. But, yes, there have been junctions: my first solo collection, which I called *Umanesimo Punk* [Punk Humanism, Spring/Summer 2017], was a moment of extremely personal reflection. There have been others. I am using Instagram at the moment to collect the salient points of my journey. I didn't choose to show the most beautiful clothes, but chose moments instead that have meant something to me, on a personal or professional level or both. Usually both. I have chosen moments not for reasons of nostalgia, of which I am not fond, but rather with the awareness that all of this is me, and it has contributed to create what I am now. And then I have my children, who push me into the future every day. At home, I have never been treated

> **'I'm not treated like a designer at home. There's a timetable for family meals; I could be talking to Queen Elizabeth, I still need to stick to the timetable.'**

like a designer or a creative director.

Angelo: Who are you at home?

Pierpaolo: Pierpaolo or Dad. That's it. No fanfare, ermine cloaks, or anything like that. There is a timetable for our meals, and I could be talking to Queen Elizabeth, but that's the timetable and I have to follow it. For them, what they do is as important as what I do: lessons, cooking and all the rest. Everyone has their own world and their own reality. And it is right that they do. If you live together, you must respect each other's worlds, so that everyone has their own independence. In this protracted period of cohabitation you learn more about those worlds, which perhaps you had only observed superficially before. My children are from three different generations – they are aged 23, 20 and 13 – and it's like being in contact with different worlds. It's always been clear to me that I don't wear a crown at home.

Angelo: I find this self-awareness as marvellous as it is rare in our system.

Pierpaolo: I think I am very self-confident, while often people who are looking for stereotypes and forms do that because they are very insecure in relation to what they do. Franca [Sozzani] always said that if someone worked in a very serious way, they had no need to take their role seriously. I don't feel like the lone designer or the boss of everyone; I feel part of a team. The people who work with me are the coolest people around, otherwise I wouldn't have chosen them, and I wouldn't work with them. I only want good, strong people whose creativity is different from my own, and are not yes-people. I don't only work with best; I also work with the youngest. I like to hear from everyone not because I am disenchanted, but because I am sure of myself.

Angelo: You know, Pierpaolo, whenever I read on the couch, I always cover myself with the blanket from that first collection in 2016 that has the 'Love Blade' motif created by Zandra Rhodes on it: the heart and the blade. I like that blanket a lot. It's black with a red motif, and when I look at it, I think of you and of how much that pattern, not created by you but by another person, represents your work. There is the heart, which is universally recognized as a symbol of romanticism and sentimentalism, and the sword, which is stuck into the heart from above, and the heart is open. Despite being an almost violent piece of iconography – it could be a pierced heart from a horror film – it is extremely romantic. It is in this mess of beautiful contradictions delicately resolved that I rediscover the essence of your work. Do you identify with that?

Pierpaolo: I find myself totally represented in that pattern. That was my first solo collection and I took off again from my aesthetic roots: Piero della Francesca, that period from the end of the 15th century to the beginning of the 16th century, I wanted it to be a passage, a handing over of the baton. I thought of Bosch, who was a free thinker, because it's truly difficult to define Bosch as a Renaissance painter. Bosch was a freethinker in the midst of a movement that was very different, and Zandra too is a romantic of punk. So the two were voices out of tune with the choir of the two movements that I consider to be fundamental: humanism and punk. So I asked Zandra to interpret Bosch and then pass the torch to me so I could make a collection with those elements that were, fundamentally, a part of my historical past. That's how I feel; I am aware and also alert to that which is the past, my past, but not in a nostalgic way; the coldness of the blade together with the heart is what truly defines me.

Angelo: How do you live with time, in general? Do you feel its weight? Does it force you to move in cycles? Since I have known you I have never had the impression that you worry about being 40, 50 or 20 years old.

Pierpaolo: Deep down, I don't worry too much about that stuff. I'm not interested in it. I don't think about what happened 10 years ago. I prefer time as memory, in which the past, present and future are eliminated.

Angelo: My final question: if this conversation were to be sealed in a box for exactly a decade, what would you like the reader in 10 years to think about after reading this conversation?

Pierpaolo: I would like them to think that it had been written the day before they read it. If you believe in certain values, I think that you will equally believe in them today, in 10 years' time, and 10 years ago. At the end of the day, it should all be the same. If something is too tied to a historical moment I think it is not deep enough and it doesn't talk about you.

Stefano Pilati and Jerry Stafford

‘The sphere of the corporate is shaking, so why pay attention to it?’

Stefano Pilati and Jerry Stafford in conversation, 26 April 2020.

Jerry Stafford: How are you feeling today? How is your mood?

Stefano Pilati: There so many reasons not to be well at this moment and also not to really be enjoying anything, because there is too much uncertainty, but for some reason I am kind of everything but sad. I don’t know how to say this: the lack of hope, even before the pandemic, sometimes made me really sad. For me, the lack of hope is almost like a pandemic itself. But, for some reason, right now, I am actually quite hopeful, paradoxically, in a moment when I should be even less hopeful than usual.

‘I cannot believe that from one day to the next, everything that I’ve loved and enjoyed and has been part of my life has almost become like a memory.’

Jerry: How long have you been in lockdown for?

Stefano: Oh, you know, maybe six weeks or something. As you know, I live and work in the same place here in Berlin, so, in reality, more like seven years! Allowing myself to work and to live in the same building, or at least the same place, was very new to me, and of course it brought me to this *modus vivendi* that is very much to do with staying home. I am used to spending lots of time here. I’ve found myself really at ease with this situation, because not much has changed.

Jerry: At the moment, do you have a new daily routine?

Stefano: I already had a set up to organize my daily routine exclusively around my work and around my team. So my routine was very fixed: wake up in the morning, work out, 10 o’clock in the office, stay at the office as long as possible. My daily routine was very organized. So, crazily, what I feel the most is that I had to break my daily routine, due to being alone. Also understanding more than ever the importance of being digital. I know it, but it is very difficult for me to do Photoshop and graphics myself. I am very digital with my team, but not digital myself. So being by myself, my routine has got a bit fucked up. I don’t have anyone in the office. The general thing is to stay home, but I always stay home, so what can I organize? Do I organize my office or my house? Do I do my work? It gives you the feeling that you are never productive, and I don’t like that. My daily routine now: wake up, have breakfast, maybe go out into the park. I have things to do because I am by myself, so I get this apprehension as well, based on the fact that I never feel productive.

Jerry: But Stefano, you are productive, and you touched on something that we’ll talk about later on, about your engagement, professionally and socially, with social media. We have been talking about the home environment and the daily routine and one of your Instagram posts is in fact entitled ‘Domestic’. Can you explain what is behind this meta-discourse, if I can call it that? It seems particularly pertinent to these times.

Stefano: I don’t know what it is, sometimes I fall in love with the idea of certain words and I realize they haven’t been used or misused, or maybe forgotten. So a long time ago at Saint Laurent, I was obsessed with the word ‘manifesto’ and that kind of provocative and political language. You know, just to show fashion and to connect it to that. And then ‘random’ is another word; I built my brand around it. ‘Domestic’ was something that came into my mind as a question. Like, what does it mean, ‘domestic’? It is your environment; it was the consequence of me living and working here, so that everything became kind of domestic, also in terms of research and dynamic. My team was a domestic team because we were in the house. I fell in love with this word, and then, all of a sudden, I thought that part of branding is also about expressing a bit of intimacy and creating a level of engagement with the public in a way that should be quite personal. And so, for me, personally, when I do ‘domestic,’ slightly naively, I called it an online publication. And I started to create covers and have a theme. And everything was related to having followers understand what was behind certain designs and then to sell those designs. With online and other platforms, you are very short of space to express yourself. Imagery is definitely one thing, but how can you be personal? That is why I introduced my domestic environment. And then the fact that we all use a smartphone, I saw it almost as a challenge to be satisfied with an aesthetic, that I had to choose between just a few tools, a few functions. How can I make it cute? That challenged me, too. I think I did a good job. At the same time, we also had a reaction from followers. Every time I did something it actually pushed up sales. I felt so good about the fact that you can be authentic and domestic and, at the same time, sell your clothes and designs and have a purpose. But I didn’t feel like it was a polluted act of pushing people into consumption. I wanted to give something that was mine and was really personal: my words, my touch, my aesthetics. Not a copy and paste. It’s an effort.

Jerry: Your choice to live in Berlin has been a central part of your work for a long time. How do you feel the city has reacted to the present circumstances, and what do you think of the country’s realpolitik?

Stefano: Listen, I don’t follow German politics because I don’t speak German, so I am always sceptical about making conclusions about it. What I can say, on a very high level – what I know – is that Germany reacted very well, and especially Berlin, because here there is a sense of preserving the space and the people in a way that I haven’t found in other cities. There is a sense of general community in Berlin, and the integration between foreigners in Berlin is really special. Everybody kind of stays low and respects each other. At the same time, Germany decided on a method of flattening the curve that I thought was a very smart choice and came very easily to me for all the reasons I have mentioned. And I live in a park, so if I really want to take a good walk… Of course, the first week I was panicking. I even called you! I was panicking, like, I need space, I need to get out of here and I have been abandoned and blah, blah, blah. Then I guess I stopped that and calmed down.

‘Everybody’s saying we need to be more human, more sensitive, and so on, but we should’ve been that before the pandemic! A lot of people just woke up.’

Jerry: But in your personal and professional lives, you have been profoundly inspired and motivated by what one could call an underground scene. What do you think about the potential threats from the present crisis to this network?

Stefano: The fear I have is that, I guess, I still cannot accept this situation. I cannot believe that from one day to the other, everything that I loved and enjoyed and was part of my life has almost became like a memory. At least if you leave you move from one place to another place. I’m not sad, though. It is still difficult for me to think that those memories are not going to happen again. They are very beautiful feelings. I literally felt empowered. I was surrounded by all my kids; I say ‘my kids’ and everyone will hate me saying that, but this is how I feel. They are very young and out there and there was so much for me to share, and I engage with them so well. I was kind of supportive of this young dynamic that I never had in my life before. I was really enjoying that, and to think of that as only a memory is a sad thing. Now, the future… I do not think we will go back to what we were. We have to spend time to rebuild what we have lost in this year and a half: lost jobs, lost lives, everything. This city has a very creative culture, and it is an identity as well. I believe that the people who built this were creative people, so there will be a way. Here we also have space. It is a city of space. There are a lot of spaces that haven’t been exploited. Talking about the underground, maybe something else will emerge. Maybe a new house music, that will really be made in the house! I have no idea!

Jerry: On a wider level, a lot of theorists and social thinkers have been saying that what we are experiencing at the moment is as much an unveiling and a highlighting of existing societal and political problems as it is a new set of what are now widely termed ‘unprecedented challenges’?

Stefano: The challenges now are finally in everybody’s faces. Also, now everybody is saying we need to be more human, more sensitive, and so on, but we should have been that before the pandemic! A lot of people just woke up. I had to change myself, when I moved from where I was to where I am now. It all changed me and alerted me to the fact that I cannot only be defined by my work. Everybody is panicking because it’s like, ‘What next?’ But in a way I have been through that already. I was already deciding not to go out. For me, the only thing that I really, really feel is that it cost me a lot to change, and I could start to see the fruits of that change. So I’m just a bit shocked that it feels like I need to change again! I feel that I am in a good place for this new world, but I have to do much more, and adapt to my age, too. Let’s do it. I’ve already done a lot, but let’s do it. I already took the risks.

Jerry: You mentioned the word ‘manifesto’ earlier. You created your brand Random Identities as a reaction to your experience of a systemized corporate business hierarchy. That hierarchy is now under an immediate and unprecedented threat that is pushing it to the limits of its economic and creative capacities. How do you feel about your manifesto in the light of the present crisis?

Stefano: I am not afraid. I do not even think that there are fewer chances available now than before. If you are emerging now, and you are young, maybe the crisis forces you to be more focused. This is healthy. Especially because you have the privilege not to be part of the corporate thing. The sphere of corporate is shaking, so why pay attention to it? In particular, corporate fashion is important because the revamping of the brands and the houses was like a re-editing of beautiful books. It made them a bit more accessible, like a nice hardback copy. So let's be part of this restoration of something that should never have been lost. We all need to find our identities. I remember when I met Grace Wales Bonner. It was late at night, but I was, like, 'Darling, you are 25 years old. Think about your voice. You have it. And if I can hear it, it is pretty good.'

'When I met Grace Wales Bonner I was, like, 'You are 25 years old. Think about your voice. You have it. And if I can hear it, it is pretty good.''

Jerry: There is a sense of an all-pervading fearfulness across our lives at the moment. Can you access this yourself as an almost liberating feeling, which also embraces an idea of fearlessness?

Stefano: Oh, yes, I do. Totally. I went through that process, Jerry, and I am scared, I am fearful. Nothing is easy.

Jerry: No, no sure. But the use of clichés like 'crisis breeds creativity', for example. I mean, Anna Wintour predictably used it in an interview with Naomi the other day. The other one is that this is a time for reflection and resourcing. They have been ubiquitous these last few weeks. How do you interpret these often-meaningless platitudes?

Stefano: Clichés might sometimes sound boring, but in this case, they are correct. We all know that historically we shouldn't be blasé about certain clichés; they are clichés because they really are meaningful. And it is true that crisis breeds creativity, because it has always been. What we know is that World War Two – the theatre, the marionettes – it was amazing. Schiaparelli, yes, absolutely. And then a political crisis in the UK produced punk. In America, hip-hop was a reaction to a crisis.

Jerry: Your clothes have always in part been a reflection of the socio-political zeitgeist, whether this be gender, labour or race identifying. Will your own design process be affected or impacted by the consequences of the present crisis?

Stefano: Mobility is a factor that will change a lot. There will be fewer occasions to go out, and very selected, which will have an impact on consumption, whose purpose is: 'I have to go there, so I will buy this because I want to look like that.' It could be the office, the yoga class, going to pick up the children at school, whatever. All those reasons will be very much reduced. But reduced to what? Dressing up at home? How many times you can go out and where you can go. First of all, I believe that the young generation will adapt in one way or another. A lot of young people haven't been attacked by the virus because they are more solid by nature. Then, because of the mobility problems, I guess that everything will be restricted, at least for a certain time, to finding inspiration and interactions very locally. What does it mean to be global? This is something we also have to face, especially if you are a young designer. Like, 'Oh, I have my brand and I need to sell it globally.' Did you sell it in London? Did you do your job? Buyers won't go to New York to pick up the latest brands, so everyone will be more supportive locally and in their own culture. There will also be those who adapt to mobility and non-mobility because they can, because they are supported, because they are young and they are already connected. It is all about them.

Jerry: You have always been someone who believes in what I term 'chic for chic's sake'. You believed in the inherent value and importance of a male – or now a more non-specific gender – elegance and sensuality. Is this true?

Stefano: I have always said that I grew up in a moment where chic wasn't misused. I understood that chic meant more than elegance and cool. For me, it is above everything; it is the ultimate adjective you can apply to someone. You don't even perceive it, but you know it is there. So cool or not cool, old or new – I don't care. That's what's inspiring. With my clothes you try to push yourself to… not an attitude, an understanding.

Jerry: And have you been particularly attentive to this on a personal level during this lockdown? Do you still feel the need to express yourself through your own style and your relationship with clothes on a daily basis even though you are on your own?

Stefano: Absolutely. I have a lot of clothes, Jerry. A lot of cute clothes. My research into clothes is constant. Even my pattern-maker keeps sending me stuff and ideas that I put into my work. When I try things on, for me, it's not even an effort. Obviously,

I don't interact with people and this is my house, but I change every day. Every day is another day. Maybe now I am repeating some things, maybe I find myself a little more comfortable… What an awful word! Comfortable!

Jerry: We touched on this earlier, but how has social media been central to your own brand communication over the past few years? Has it prepared you for what will now inevitably become a predominantly digitally driven landscape? You have been developing this for a long time.

Stefano: It was the only thing I had available! And even if I didn't know it, I took the approach that I didn't want to be conformist with my eye and my taste. I was very surprised and happy, to tell you the truth. I had my private account on Instagram, and then I switched and opened my official account, and on both occasions, from my friends and then from broader feedback, people were actually appreciating my layout, my choice of pictures and my messages. And, you know, I enjoyed it. For me, it was a new direction, and I like editing it and thinking about it. What I never got used to, though, is the constant use. I find myself very much in a corner, because on one hand I think the brand needs my input in order to be understood, but on the other hand, it is very time-consuming, and I want to think if I could have someone helping me to do this or to do it for me. Because social media confronts you with transparency because you can't fake it for long – it is one choice or another. If you use it with a purpose, like mine, it is the only tool I have, and I make it cute and I decided to open up my transparency through this tool. What I love the most is that I can talk about the brand and receive feedback from the people who actually buy the products. That, for me, is heaven. There is not really a strategy; there is an understanding. And at the moment it is also all I have.

Jerry: Ironically, in an age when so much literature has been published about the dangers of surveillance capitalism, this crisis has catapulted us into a situation where we are even more dependent on these platforms, which might indeed become the only sanctuary for creative performance before a mass audience. Can we resist their ubiquity while maintaining an audience?

Stefano: I don't know – and when you don't know, there is always a level of danger, isn't there? I am using social media; I am not defining myself through social media. What I really hope the new generation understands is that real interaction, physical interaction is still so important. That social media is only an extension of yourself; it is not you. Obviously, to have this extension of you, you have to know yourself, you need to perform and be able to use it.

Jerry: Back to the domestic, what's been your lockdown soundtrack?

Stefano: Miles Davis, John Coltrane and Bill Evans; it is very jazzy. I watched a documentary on Miles Davis and when I watched it I realized how ignorant I was, in the sense that I thought I passively understood the majesty of his music, but I didn't really interiorize it. In this situation, I feel him; he makes me feel something different. Maybe it is also the purity of an instrument versus a voice.

'The climate has changed. What will make me mad and sad is if we go back to normal, saying, 'It was cute that year we had so much good air.''

Jerry: Do you feel that you have been under personal or societal pressure at this time to be proactive and effective? Have you been resisting the urge to do nothing or are you capable of embracing boredom?

Stefano: I am always bored! I have to accept it – I am always bored. I am always questioning, always looking for the unexpected, for what touches me in a way that I would never have even planned. It is definitely not boring to live a life through a pandemic. I wouldn't describe it as boring, even if something physical makes you think you are getting bored, because you wake up at 11 and you couldn't care less, and you go for a walk at three o'clock. That for me isn't a form of boredom. After this is over, I believe that there will be more of a sense of community, as well. It won't make me sad that department stores reopen, but it will make me sad if the planet goes back to what it was. In the park, the rhythm of the seasons is something that is so good for your soul. I see the trees in front of my house changing every single day. I see the colours changing, and I see hawks flying over. We cannot go back to where we were. We still have to fight, but wherever it came from, this is a really good push to improve the climate-change situation to a place where it is sustainable. It was relevant before and it is relevant now. But what is tangible is that globally, from New York, to Shanghai, to here, the climate has changed. We can really see it and really feel it on our skin. What will make me really mad and sad is if we go back to normal, saying, 'It was cute that year we had so much good air.'

Natacha Ramsay-Levi and David Sims

‘I’m slightly worried that I’m just going to lapse, like an addict, back into the hyperactive.’

Natacha Ramsay-Levi and
David Sims in conversation,
30 April 2020.

Natacha Ramsay-Levi: Where are you?

David Sims: I’m in London. I don’t mind being here. We are very lucky; there are enough rooms for us to escape from one another if needs be. People in London don’t appear to be tied to an official lockdown. There are lots of people in the park and I can go cycling. I’ve only just started to get… boredom isn’t the right word. I’ve got this sort of anxiety that is a bit inert. I think I might be suffering from not having answers. It’s this control trigger I have.

‘I enjoy my work. There’s a compulsion to it that’s a little bit fraught, a sort of ego phenomenon that makes me think I’ve got to prove something.’

Natacha: We are so used to having structure and to thinking that the world will always be the same. It’s challenging, but interesting. I’m starting to be positive about it.

David: I’ve resorted to becoming a gardener, which I never thought I’d do. It’s not necessarily my favourite pastime, but its rewards are so clear. I’ll never have the time to do it when I start working again, so it’s an interlude.

Natacha: Who knows? I don’t believe that we will go back to work the same as before.

David: Let’s do one of these questions that *System* submitted. ‘What does a typical day look like for you during this period of uncertainty?’

Natacha: At the beginning, it was not fun at all. It was military, in order to deal with this uncertainty. Now I’ve really settled into it, and I love doing classes with my kid. I’m cooking a lot, and working… Just trying to think. I can’t draw or start to cut fabrics or anything like that, but I try to think about what the next collection will be. That, to me, is the light at the end of the tunnel. Then there’s how we are going to do things, how the industry will change, and how I want my life to change.

David: I just feel like I’m going to have to be reactive. I can’t think that broadly. I can think of an idea that maybe I want to photograph, but they’re just whimsical ideas; they’re not related to anything in particular.

Natacha: That’s good. I have a friend, a writer, who told me she’s finding things in herself that are really wild, and were hidden by all the structures of life.

David: It’s the sudden cessation of distractions. I enjoy my work. There’s a compulsion to it that’s a little bit fraught, a sort of ego phenomenon that makes me think I’ve got to prove something, that I’ve got to be great at doing something in order to matter.

Natacha: Another question, then. ‘What are the benefits, if any, to the disruption to your creative practice?’

David: Space and time. An unobstructed view of the inner thought process. I don’t have to be on the phone very often; not that I’ve anything to talk about!

Natacha: For me, it’s taking time to find something very personal. We now have time to think. We are usually all action all the time, and there is something nice about having space to think and for the inner self.

David: I grew up in and experienced an earlier time of being a photographer and working in fashion. We had a lot more time available to us, and there were nothing like the demands and range of outcomes that one image has to supply now. I wonder if that acceleration will change now. I like to think that this is a very meditative experience, akin to a stillness that I’d like to achieve, but I’m slightly worried that I’m just going to lapse, like an addict, back into the hyperactive.

Natacha: That’s what is going to be questioned, in general. And I think – and I’ve made a point of this over the past five weeks – I think it’s also about valuing creativity again. In the fashion industry, we were in a world where creativity didn’t have time. As you were saying, we needed to do so much with one image. There was much more marketing. In the future, I think we’ll do fewer images, fewer shows, fewer clothes, but they will carry more emotions, more authenticity and more creativity.

David: I hope you’re right. The underlying culture of fashion has always been ‘capitalistic’, but that was increased by commercialization, which seemed to grow exponentially, without anyone being able to stop it. Now this thing that was so virile suddenly seems to be so fragile. What I find really surprising is how much it is attached to my own sense of ambition, because the spaces and opportunities to get your work seen has grown as well. Imagining how our livelihoods are drawn from such a commercialized process is hard to… I’m bewildered thinking about it. Not because I want to make more money, but because I want to find placement for doing what I do. One of the problems I’ve always had – and I’m sure you’ve shared it, too – is just how many people there are on a set or a project. They don’t necessarily take anything away from it, but they don’t necessarily bring anything to it, either. You mentioned that word ‘authenticity’, and that neutrality gets in the way of that. I keep saying to people that the only thing I can photograph is a personality, so there has to be some kind of intimacy. I think what was lost in that growth was this kind of intimacy; this romantic notion about why we are doing this thing and what we are going to achieve.

Natacha: Absolutely. It’s funny because I often think about the conversations that we started having before confinement and we were already saying, ‘Let’s move on from the studio and having 60 people on a set.’ In your job I can’t imagine what it’s like to have to find the flame, the magical, emotional moment, with 60 people around you.

‘I want to be eccentric again; I want clothing that blows you away. But I’ve had too many demands, too much struggle, and you could sense that struggle.’

David: [Laughs] You can’t! I’d forgotten about those conversations. It seemed like fantasy at that point, trying to map out how we could track back and get into some kind of state of intimacy again. I mean, when it happens, it happens, but sometimes it can’t because there are too many people and it is interrupted. I always end up having at least one element or moment where I feel like that channel suddenly flies open and you end up taking your picture of someone rather than something. But the something, if it’s there, is ephemeral, a moment. I think the big change to look forward to will be working closely in tandem with much smaller groups, maybe down to a maximum of four people. I’m really quite excited about that.

Natacha: Let’s do another question, shall we? ‘As things gradually return to some level of normality, do you think your impulse will be to explore notions of fantasy and escapism, or do you think you’ll be more inclined to double-down on realism, documenting the moment?’ I feel that it’s very important to put quietness, fantasy and eccentricity back into fashion. Because it was so commercialized and demanding before, I was always a bit against everything, so there was a sad underlying mood. I was trying not to push that side of myself, but there was always some kind of reaction. Whereas now I believe that fantasy has come again. I want to be eccentric again; I want clothing to be extravagant or flamboyant, something that blows you away a bit. I had too many demands; I was always struggling and you could feel that struggle.

David: I completely understand that. I go through those inner conflicts even in the short time that it takes to make a photograph. For you, working for weeks and months in the build-up towards presenting your work, as an artist, you’re living on a sort of knife-edge of your own self-respect. That’s something I completely understand. My inclination is to go towards something that feels real, even though asking someone to sit for me is, by its very nature, a proposed moment rather than something that happens organically. I’m not going to spend a long time with another person and constantly photograph them throughout. That’s not really my shtick.

Natacha: Another question: ‘Given that catwalk shows are so linked to triggering emotions and the senses, are you considering the realities of presenting Chloé collections in alternative ways?’ It’s a bit early to say, but let’s say, ‘For sure.’ I don’t believe there will be any catwalk shows. There will be events, maybe, but… how to present things? I’m emotionally attached to fashion shows for many reasons, because it’s kind of like the concert at the end of a school year. This moment the whole team can embrace something. So I don’t believe everything will become digital. I think we absolutely need to have an event of some kind. I also know that having runway shows with women walking who aren’t able to show their personalities or having that ‘robot’ walk was already something I wanted to question for September. I was already there. I’m now pushing that idea of movement further in general and thinking about how we can show women, and their movement, their personality. It’s too early to share!

David: It’s really interesting when you say that someone walking on the runway or catwalking is already robotic, already mechanized. That it’s not a genuine or an organic event. Are you thinking about creating a more personalized image for the presentation then?

Natacha: I think so. The first step was about stopping that robotic side of shows, but I think for this September we will have to go further. I’m already trying to think of collaborations with a choreographer, but very abstract, and about trying to find a new vocabulary about movement in general. What can a movement be? What can a fashionable movement be other than a runway show? A question for you: 'Fashion photography is a highly collaborative process. Are you considering the realities of shooting fashion in more insular, personal and stripped-down ways?'

David: I would like to strip it down as much as possible. Part of the problem for me now is that when I'm working digitally I have to work very closely with people whose technical abilities surpass my own, because I have none. I should probably take this time to learn how to use a digital camera or I could possibly go back to using film. There's no reason not to do either of those things. I opted to use digital to the extent that I have because of its immediacy. It's such a fast way of working, which seemed to line up to some of the expectations of the people I was working for. I kind of gravitated to that, not willingly at first, but I ended up doing it and making that decision suddenly meant that I was working for a bigger number of people.

> **'In social media and journalism, there are both critics and people giving you false praise. It can leave you with a pixelated version of your own identity.'**

Natacha: For example, the shoot you did for *Vogue Italia* in the countryside ['Dance Vision', November 2019]. That was on film or digital?

David: It was a mix, and that's just down to my nervousness. I was afraid. I mean, my abilities as an analogue photographer weren't too bad. I started out in the dark room, so I had a pretty good grasp of how to expose and get a print from a negative, but it had been so long, so I decided to use digital as a backup. I think there's something in the way film reacts to certain, let's say 'abuses' in the process, that you won't get digitally. You can imitate it, but it will always lose. Something about the way data is so compressed, you can get colour extrapolations. There are interesting ways to explore colour transitions digitally, but the film has a sound and a feel of its own. I wanted to do it that way, but I chose a digital camera just to be safe. Just shows what a fucking pussy I am, right?

Natacha: Let's move on! [Both laughing] So, about the past: 'Was there a defining image, reference, person or moment from your teenage years that, now you look back, was instrumental in you working in fashion?'

David: It wasn't when I was a teenager, but I once took a picture of a guy called Grev. I was about 21, and taking the photo I suddenly realized that I had this thing going around in my head. It was inspired by something that I didn't necessarily want to recreate, but I still wanted to take some kind of vibration from it and ask someone to perform in a similar way. When I was doing it, and this is going to sound really pretentious, it felt like an out-of-body experience. The camera has that power; it has a sort of hypnotic charm. I was aware that there was a big rock between me and the next level, and that sudden realization snapped me out of the magic, so it didn't last very long, but I can keep looking at the picture as a way of remembering that feeling.

Natacha: That's a beautiful story. Another question: 'Is there an influence that's always coming back in your work? Is having something like that to return to liberating or do you find yourself wanting to discover a new language?'

David: Why don't you answer that one?

Natacha: It's a tension between the two. I like to 'reference'. Before doing fashion, I studied history, so it's part of my way of thinking that we are part of something that has already existed. It's not like we do a fashion revolution every year, far from it. It's more what kind of values or qualities or beauty you want to show, which you've seen somewhere, and you want to show your way of seeing it. I have things that I always come back to, but it's more a balance between something old and something new. Something that you dig up from the past. You have, between you and that girl, a vision of what it could be, and the work is only about finding that tension. I don't think it has changed anything beyond that. I think the new language will be about being truer to yourself. Being able to have more choices and to listen to myself more, rather than being surrounded by lots of people who tell what I should do, what I should present, the way I should do things. For me that should be the new language – to be sharper and bolder in what I can say.

David: Will someone permit you the space to retain that sense of individuality, that independence that isolation has served up? There are a couple of tyrannies about what you do at play in social media and journalism: there are the critics and the people giving you false praise that can sometimes leave you with a pixelated version of your own identity. It's not easy to know yourself when you have to see it through other people's eyes first. Do you think you could find a way to put up a wall? My problem with this globalized, information-led age in which we are all trying to find our own voices is that we are sensitive people, yet we are driven towards having to be tough.

Natacha: I absolutely know where you are coming from. It's a strange thing, because as everything has become so commercialized, we have had to be so tough, but at the same time, as things are faster, you have to be more intuitive. It's a strange mix of ups and downs.

David: That kind of factory-led environment became about quantity and mass rather than any essence. Unfortunately, I think that makes us create 'product', and there's less tangibility in what we're making. I hope that I've got the wherewithal, you know, the sheer chutzpah to develop better filters.

> **'I was given a famous Helmut Newton picture by a client. Rather than be given the task of interpreting this picture, I was being paid to copy it note for note.'**

Natacha: 'Did you always strive to be different or more of individual from a young age?' And here's a quote from you: 'What I'm trying to avoid is comparisons with my peers and my generation.' 'How do (both of) you strive to be different from the rest today? Is it a mindset or method?' Clearly, for you it's a mindset. I'm answering for you! You don't want to work in fashion if you can't be different or individual. Personally, I think this is the one reason why I decided to do fashion. I really felt it was a medium where I could show what I felt was different. I still think collaboration is very important, though. My job is a lot about teamwork. I've been trained to work in a big team and I miss that a lot. Collaborations with other designers, too. Being able to have a conversation all the time is very important to me.

David: I agree with that. I think that's a big part of my nature as well.

Natacha: A lot of this is lacking in fashion, for me. In film, it's a bit different. There are schools and people who work together or write articles together; there's a kind of collaborative spirit about where cinema should go. Whereas, in fashion, it's different. It's very, very individual; it's very competitive.

David: When I said that I'm trying to avoid comparison with peers of my generation, that was a long time ago, but I still feel belligerently the same. But I'm a lot less vexed by that sort of imperative. I am, weirdly, quite an obedient person, I think. I have a sort of need to fit in, but I'm also quite dissident. So, the next one's for you: 'What acts as a catalyst for your professional ambition?'

Natacha: I have this pretentious feeling that I have things to say, even if I don't see myself as the most creative person. I know designers who are much more creative than me. As a creative director, I like to show or put on stage not only my work, but the work of people who I love and really admire. I am almost acting as a fan: 'I love that artist, how can we work together?' To me, that's what's exciting. Next question! 'Can you recall a specific look, design or collection (for Natacha) or image, shoot, campaign (for David) that you worked on early on in your careers that gave you the confidence to believe you could go on to create great work in fashion?' Wow!

David: Hand on heart, my answer to the first portion of that question is the last collection you did.

Natacha: Ahhh, thank you!

David: You know, to some extent, every designer has a position of power and when I go to work with them I'm immersed in it and I'm bewitched by it, but I'm also beholden to it. I feel like it's my job to supply a suitable visual. Understanding how is quite elusive sometimes, but when I saw some of those clothes, the way you put them out and the way you presented them, in that particular show, I was able to tap into it so easily. I didn't have to create a sort of journalistic, smart answer for it.

Natacha: Thank you very much! From my side, it's different because I've known your work since forever, and we worked together with Nicolas [Ghesquière]. Of course, if I have to recall one thing, it's the campaign for Balenciaga. I was on the shoot and it was pretty amazing. To me, I couldn't think of one image that was more important than another. What I can see in your pictures and what I love is how much meaning they have. It's those moments you were talking about, that we can see and feel in your pictures.

David: Yeah, there's that chime. I don't supply that with every picture any more, obviously. I'm so afraid of looking at my archives as I don't want to see the low points. The other terrifying thing, really, is that I don't know if it's ever as good as I imagine it to be. So it's better to live in the fantasy of it all being good!

Natacha: But you have this balance between something elevated and something that is human and emotional. I think that's something you've always kept in your work, whatever the picture.

David: I'm flattered to hear that. That's very kind.

Natacha: 'Can you give an example of what's most intuitive for you in your work and what you overthink?'

David: I think those things happen simultaneously.

Natacha: It's funny, because I've been asked by Riccardo [Bellini, CEO of Chloé] to do creative DNA brand codes. I'm starting to do it now, and I have to look back on all the collections and see what is still relevant and what we want to push. Looking at the shows, I'm like, 'OK, this was wrong, this was wrong...' OK, next question: 'How do you deal with criticism? Have you grown better at coping with this over time?' I'll go. It depends where it comes from and who it comes from. I mean, I love to read the reviews after a show; I'm obsessed. I think most of the people who write – and I say most of them – take a lot of time. I'm not sure if I'm better now at dealing with criticism. It can be soul-destroying, no?

> **'Criticism of a work seems to be viewed as an unholy act. Yet some of my best decisions have been made as a reaction to receiving harsh criticism.'**

David: I've found that the 'craft' of criticism has been affected by the tyranny of social media. I've sometimes felt like criticism of a work seems to be viewed in and of itself as a sort of unholy act. Yet some of my best decisions have been made as a reaction to receiving harsh criticism. It's not always invited, but to have somebody hit me with a 'no' or find something objectionable in it, has sometimes pushed me somewhere much more important. I chose to work for a long time with people whose behaviour around me probably looked from the outside like a dysfunctional, collaborative relational thing. I think some of the best work comes from this collision of forces supplied by two people's senses of invention. I've enjoyed that kind of collaborative thing, and some of the people that I've collaborated with have sometimes actually stood in front of my desires, and done it very knowingly. Sometimes that doesn't work out and you've got to step back on it, but I'm not inclined to hear good things or bad things about my work unless I'm in a personal conversation. Unlike yours, my work doesn't go out into a domain where people are paid to respond. I don't get that.

Natacha: 'Do you require the pressure of a deadline to achieve your best results?'

David: No.

Natacha: For me, it's a bit more complicated. I don't feel the pressure of a deadline in the moment, but the three last weeks before a show I become totally animal. I feel like I'm an animal. I feel like whatever I think or feel, it's going through my skin, through my eyes, through my ears. I can hear many conversations going on behind the wall. I feel like all my senses are so profoundly heightened and changed, and more sensitive. I like that moment. And, of course, the date arrives.

David: I've often seen that sort of chronic fatigue strike other designers after a show. It's like they can almost hardly speak. You describe it so vividly. It does sound delightful, like a really powerful experience lived for three weeks. It must be bloody exhausting.

Natacha: But also energizing. You feel your creativity and that your inner self is at its strongest. 'Would you consider yourself a well-organized person in your career and creative activity?'

David: Not organized in my career, but creatively, I do like to have systems. I'm obsessed with sequence in what I do because I want to create something that ultimately I can pull apart, that I can deconstruct. That requires physical things to be in place and me to react in a certain way, so that ultimately I can find a certain escape.

Natacha: It's the structure you need to be free. 'Now that you're both established in your fields – with teams and responsibilities – do you feel yourselves more affected by the business and commercial side of what you do?' I can answer that because that's really part of my job. I started in fashion at the moment where the business and commercial side was not really in place yet. I mean, you remember the Balenciaga era with Nicolas. Since then, the system has changed, and as we were saying, it became so much more commercial. Of course, I have to take more responsibility for that, and I really do hope that it will become less important!

David: I never used to think – not one iota – about having to draw an income from what I did, and I kept that going for a really long time. Then I took a few years off work and when I came back I was suddenly aware, because I had no money left, how well-off people were. They were being amply rewarded, financially. I decided then that I had better start paying attention to that, except that led me off on a tangent that wasn't, in the end, spiritually or creatively a good approach. I made another decision later that gave me an opportunity to approach the business differently. I'm being very oblique because it wouldn't be kind to go into too much detail, but I felt like a pure focus on money was just a rabbit hole. This idea that more money makes more value is just an abstraction of the thing that I started out wanting to be. For some people, it's great; it means they can go off and buy a boat, which would be lovely, don't get me wrong. But recently, I've found that I keep saying to people that the only privilege I have, apart from being a dad, is the true privilege of being able to afford to be a photographer. It requires a certain amount of freedom. I have to have space, and I've made my own space, like a little bit of a green space where I can test out ideas without being a burden to anyone else.

> **'I've often seen chronic fatigue strike designers after a show. They can hardly speak. It sounds like a powerful experience, but it must be exhausting.'**

Natacha: What's the next question? 'What was the last instance when you are aware of your work being copied? Do you ever find imitation a form of flattery?' I don't think that it's really a question of being copied. I like to be naive about it; I like to stay humble. I think that it's a zeitgeist moment. Fashion talks about beauty, but it talks about the zeitgeist as well. I don't think it's about being copied, and, of course, in fashion we are copied, but that's fast retail and I think that's pretty cool. It's OK. It means, 'Ah, this has resonance.'

David: I have a difficult relationship with all of this stuff. It wouldn't do for me to answer without owning up and saying I possess imitative skills. I can reproduce principles of some of the work that's gone before and that's had an influence on me. It's a way, partly in my own heart, to celebrate the value of something and what it means to me. Perhaps it's too coded and not honest enough to be clear in a lot of those cases, but I think people are very well-educated, visually, and they know where I'm coming from when I do it. The only time I find it really irritating is when someone uses my work as a kind of reference point, and then their piece gets attention, rather than what I've done. Certain pictures can only ever really happen at, or exist in, or be an outcome of a certain time. When I copy one of my own pictures, I no longer know who I was when I took those pictures in my 20s. I can't really copy it, as I can't recreate the reasons for wanting to take that picture in the first place. Sometimes it can trivialize the better work.

Natacha: Yes. It's a noise, but I don't think it devalues your work. I think it's just a noise on the side.

David: I often feel that if I'm exploring something, I'm going off on a channel of my own where I feel the need to say something. So, if someone copies that picture very soon afterwards, it can really feel like that exploration has been bracketed. It ceases to be yours. I find that really irritating. It's a complex thing. I admit fully that I do copy work, but I don't look at a page and decide, 'I'm going to copy that.' I'll go into my head.

Natacha: Of course, and that's what we were saying at the beginning – it's the references. Those beautiful references. *Alors*, some questions about femininity. 'How did you see women when you were a kid – what did they mean to you? What does the word "woman", with all its socio-political weight, mean to you today?' I don't think I had the chance to question that when I was a kid. I never felt less considered because I was a woman. Perhaps I grew up in a lucky environment. Of course, now I am much more aware, and it's the same in my career. I never felt like I didn't get the job I wanted because I was a woman, so I can't say I've been a victim of that at all. What does it mean to me today? I absolutely believe that one of my roles as a female creative director is always to show the difference between men and women, and to enhance the beauty of being a woman, because I think it's such an amazing experience. I'd be very happy to try the experience of being a man, but I'm super-happy being a woman. I think we are different and this difference is meaningful. I think it's a very interesting moment right now, because everything is much more open and equal. Not on every level, but at least in terms of the conversations. The other day I was watching TV ads from the 1950s that talks about the job of being a housewife, and how women are very resourceful about finding solutions for housework or cooking or how to hang a coat. I was thinking, 'Wow, my mum was educated with that.' It's crazy, because I never felt that myself. My mum never educated me on how to be a housewife.

David: I'd like to get to a point where things are gender neutral, in that we are not having this conversation any more. What I want to do is be affected by somebody's intellect, and I want to try to appeal to theirs.

Natacha: But I believe the intellect of women has been framed by society as something different.

David: It's a threat, that's why! I don't like it when it's weaponized; I like it as a threat. I like women in photographs not looking like they are being objectified.

Natacha: 'Is femininity constantly evolving? Or is that a myth?' Of course, it's always evolving, it's moving…

David: It gets deified. It's elastic, I think. Look, if you go back to pre-Christian pagan societies, indoctrination often came from a feminine place. That got bent out of shape with the invention of Christianity. I mean, we've lived with something different for a long time, but it's evolved… Since the Second World War, it's evolved profoundly. We ought to go back to being pagan.

Natacha: Absolutely. You know the first thing I did at Chloé – because there's always this question of femininity at Chloé – I used little femininity idols, which go back to pagan society. Women were goddesses.

> **'I'm so afraid of looking at my archives as I don't know if it's ever as good as I imagine it to be. So it's better to live in the fantasy of it all being good!'**

David: It may sound a bit fluffy to say that I would like to see things be more neutral. At the same time, I would quote Malcolm X: 'By any means necessary, equality has to be achieved somehow.' If there has to be a sort of conflict to get to that, we'll take some of the collateral damage that comes with it. I'd like to see it achieved. I don't know if we're getting there anytime soon.

Natacha: 'Natacha, when you think of David's photography, what does it evoke emotionally and what does it bring out from a fashion-design perspective?' Well, I have a question for you. Are you aware that in every collection that we've designed at Chloé, your pictures have been on the mood boards? I've worked with different teams and they always bring documents, and your pictures are always there – always.

David: When we all look at pictures, we're reading a confluence of the signifiers that reach us from that picture. There's no hierarchy; they're all happening at the same time. But if it's backstage and on a mood board and part of an inner studio, whether it's my picture or another photographer's, what is the directional value of having that picture around for someone like you who's doing the work? What does it say? Are you saying 'let's make that mood'?

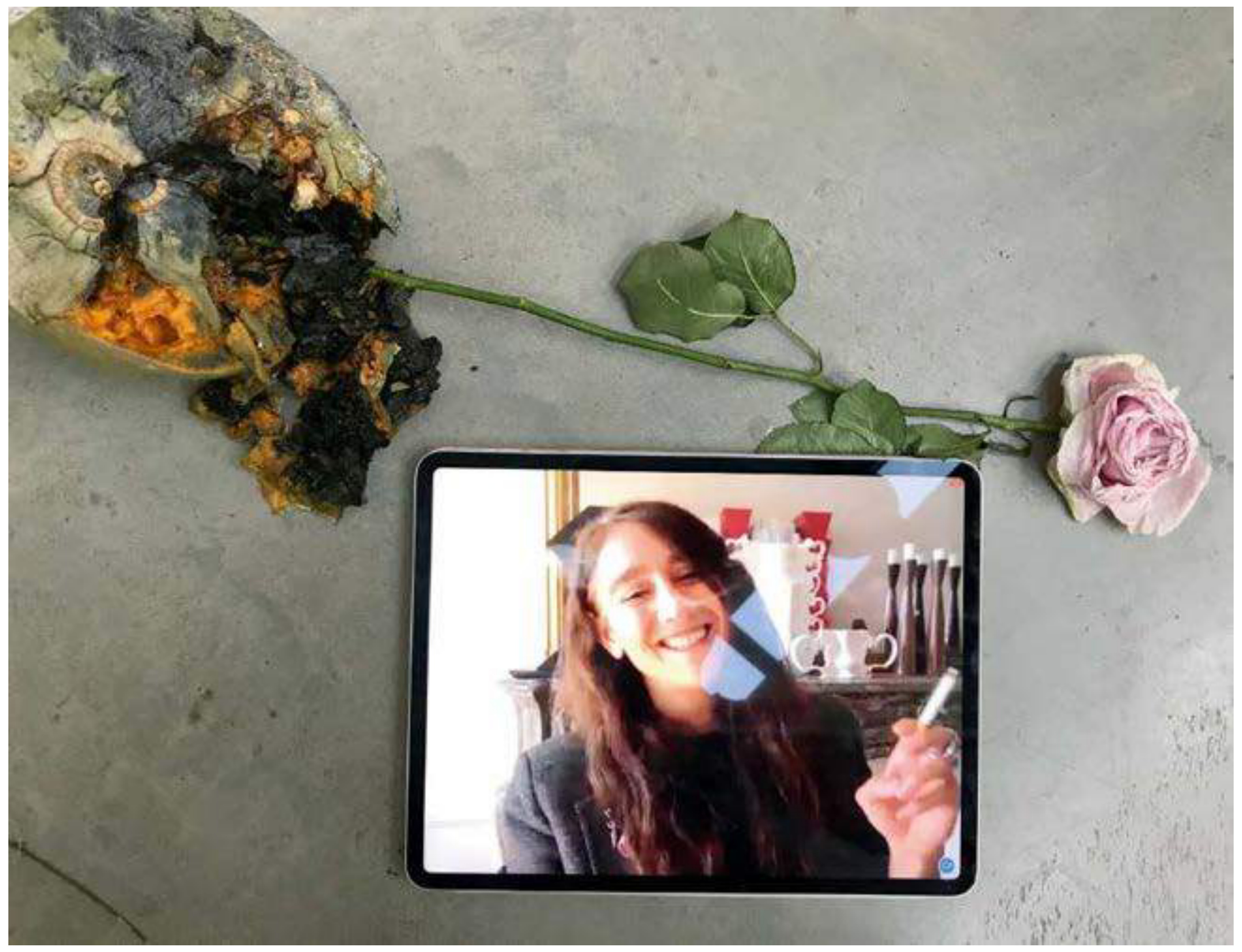
Natacha: It's because of how much emotion your pictures carry – your pictures have meaning. They say something about the moment, about the period, about the energy of the person in your photograph. We have your picture on a mood board because we want to convey that energy and bring in something fresh and new. Your pictures have so much meaning and a sense of sophistication, of elevation. There is a sense of precision, of choice. They are distinctive and a great balance between something sophisticated and something emotional. When you start a collection, that's very inspiring.

David: Once, as part of a creative brief, I was given a really famous picture by Helmut Newton. Rather than be given the task of interpreting this picture, I was being paid to copy it almost note for note. I tried to ask why we were copying this picture, and what made it so important. The person we were shooting looked nothing like the woman in the picture, by the way. She didn't have long blonde hair and she was going to wear a dress, not be nude. The conversation kind of arrived at nothing, really. It was either take their money or don't. So I said to the guys and girls who work for me, 'When you look at this picture, what do you see?' Unfortunately, their responses were really basic: it's black and white; she's got no clothes on; she's in a room. The picture shows a sexually very questionable situation, and I could feel all of the layers of that slightly awkward situation, but none of those things was being discussed. Being famous gave it a kind of layer of camouflage, do you know what I mean? It meant that it was open season to copy, and it meant that people didn't feel they had to investigate it. I do really appreciate that for you my photos seem to have some sense, that there's a resonance to them, as you say. That's ultimately what all great pictures should do, so if I've got anywhere near that, then that is very rewarding. I don't want to dwell on that too much as it sounds a bit vainglorious. I don't look at my work like that.

Natacha: But you can!

David: Well, I don't, just for the record. As I said, I find it hard to look at them sometimes. I'm going to say this because we are near the end: it's not very often that I can talk about the creative process as a whole with anybody in your position, because I feel that designers are under such a great deal of pressure. There's this very pre-determined approach to what's needed from this kind of collaboration. Going back to something we said earlier in this chat, the best thing about this work is the collaboration; the opportunity to share and to see what happens when ideas do cross over each other.

Natacha: That feels like a nice place to end. Thanks, David.



Jean Touitou and Suzanne Koller

Moderated by Thomas Lenthal

‘Life will be quieter for at least a year and a half.’

Jean Touitou and Suzanne Koller in conversation, 16 April 2020. Moderated by Thomas Lenthal.

> **‘When you’re on a huge ship and there are holes everywhere, you don’t have time to ask yourself, ‘Am I going to plug the holes with cork or with plastic?’’**

Thomas Lenthal: I’d like to start with a very obvious observation: we belong to an industry in which everyone laments that they don’t have time to do what they want to do, yet now we find ourselves in a situation where we have time on our hands. What changes might this situation bring about in the way you think about the future?

Jean Touitou: You’re right; you often hear complaints in our milieu to the effect that we don’t have enough time to get everything done. There are structural reasons for this and I can tell you what they are straight away with the aid of a biblical reference: it’s all down to the merchants in the Temple. They are the commercial directors in the fashion houses who wait until the very last minute to issue their recommendations and guidelines, which then place design studios in dire straits. Without them, we would have enough time to work at a reasonable pace. On the other hand, those same commercial directors are the reason that all the fashion houses haven’t gone under right now. Actually, we don’t really have any spare time on our hands. On the contrary, the disruption caused by this pandemic has reduced our time. You have to imagine, Thomas, what it’s like for Judith [Touitou, artistic director of A.P.C.] to coordinate the pre-autumn 2021 collection away from her studio, away from the sources of her fabrics, away from everything. That forces you to be ultra-busy the whole day. In fact, once the phase of disbelief was over, we entered into a phase not unlike the Le Mans 24-hour race: a never-ending sprint to the finish line, just to survive. When everything grinds to a halt, when you are on a huge ship and there are holes everywhere, you don’t have the time to ask yourself, ‘Am I going to plug the holes with cork or with plastic?’ No one has time for anything at all. In a lot of companies, not just our own, so many people are burning out. I know that a lot of people managed to escape to the countryside, but you just have to imagine the hours that they are working, with video conferences until 8pm and kids and the need to put meals on the table. It’s not a relaxing time, at all. The situation has the effect of massively compressing time.

Suzanne Koller: It depends: if you are a freelancer, like me, you have a lot of free time. Even if everything has just ground to a halt...

Jean: You don’t have an infrastructure to uphold. It’s really the infrastructure that’s the issue.

Suzanne: Exactly. And to circle back to your question about time, I am not at all bored, and the extra time I have on my hands is actually opening up new avenues for me. I mean, I’m the kind of person who responds quite well to adversity – I’m a fighter, more or less – and this current situation gives me time to reflect, to talk with the magazines I work with, and really think about how we could do things differently. When I look around me, of course, I have many friends like Jean and Judith who are in the process of setting out contingency plan A, B, C or D, according to whether we will reopen in June, July, September, or indeed next year, and I have the impression that this juggling of scenarios is exhausting for all of them. At magazines, I think we’re reacting to the situation by thinking about how we can communicate differently. In my case – and this is something I don’t dare mention to those people who are burning out – this time has allowed me to observe and to devise new ideas. In any case, I really think that I was completely saturated before this began, and I’m sure I’m not the only one. That’s why I really do appreciate this period of stand-by for the time that it affords me to think about what comes next. It doesn’t panic me at all.

Thomas: This is the least reflective time of all, Jean,because you have a business to run.

Jean: Yes. I am in the process of writing an internal memo about how normal business might resume. Particularly the fact that we’ll be going on fewer business trips, so we will have a quieter life for at least a year and a half – the effects of what we’re experiencing are going to last that long. There will be fewer of us in meetings; there will be fewer photo shoots with 15 people. Generally speaking, we’ll all have to do everything in a kind of minimalist way, which will probably result in more time to spare.

Suzanne: We don’t really have a choice. We’re simply going to have to start out again slowly. The restart will have to be really gradual.

Jean: Not to labour the point, but this slow pace is itself going to require an incredible amount of energy. In any type of physical activity, if you do a movement properly and at the normal speed, and then try to repeat it slowly, it takes a ridiculous amount of concentration. It will take the same kind of effort to resume business slowly, what with the security conditions and everything else. I don’t believe for a second that this crisis will have the benefit of de-stressing the fashion industry, because so many people find themselves with such difficult issues on their hands. Ultimately, and this is, unfortunately, not very poetic, it all boils down to four letters in English: R.E.N.T. I say this because the union of landlords the world over may be informal, but it is terribly rigid, and this is very much the wall that towers over us. All the magazines in the world – *Vogue*, BoF – can wax lyrical about a better world in the future, with more time, better integration, more sustainability, and the like. We can say as many enlightened things as we like about how the future will look, and how we would like it to be. But at the end of the day, the central issue remains how to deal with all these landlords. It’s paradoxical: we have the luxury of talking about principles and sharing really intelligent ideas, but the stark reality of the matter is that the rent needs to be paid. In our case, we have 50 leases on our stores. How do businesses pay the rent to maintain their physical presence? Believe you me, that’s an unsolvable question.

> **‘We have 50 leases on our A.P.C. stores. How do businesses pay the rent to maintain their physical presence? Believe me, that’s an unsolvable question.’**

Thomas: Everyone is uneasy and frightened, but if certain landlords do turn around and say, ‘Mr Touitou, it was nice knowing you’, it’s not like there’s anyone to take your place straight away.

Jean: That’s more easily said than done. When you are confronted with 50 legal departments from 50 landlords, you really have to be quite stoic. It takes a lot to say, ‘I’m not scared, bring it on.’ I am obsessed by an image of the 1929 crash. Thomas, as a very visual person, you must know all of the photos from that period of the people who were on the road, ordinary people who had lost their jobs and were on the road in search of work elsewhere. We can’t take it for granted that we’ll get anywhere with the big landlords because – and I’m sorry about this, but we do have to touch on economics – they are most often investment funds, and it’s those very same funds that, alongside insurers, lend money to states. They know perfectly well that governments at the moment are going to place themselves in risky situations, which doesn’t encourage them to relent and lower their guard at the other end of the spectrum. It’s really something that everyone in the fashion industry is facing right now, even the biggest brands. Some good news is that all of those people – buyers, journalists – who came to Paris six times a year, and went to London six times a year and Milan six times a year, will have had a break. They were all physically worn out; just a glance at them was enough to know that. No offence, but honestly, you only had to look at faces of the people in the front row. What I’m talking about is denial. Everyone in the front row at fashion shows looked like they were about to collapse. Everyone put their best foot forward with their clothes and hairstyle, but you still got the feeling that they were about to drop from exhaustion.

Suzanne: On that, we agree.

Jean: If it’s possible to talk about benefits in this initial phase of the crisis, then most definitely it will be the fact that there will be less travel and, for the moment at least, no more fashion shows. It will take the whole thing down a notch. Unfortunately, the fundamentals of the luxury industry are that human beings need signs that distinguish them, status symbols, signs of wealth. It’s precisely these outward signs that they purchase from luxury brands. In principle, that’s just human nature, so it stands to reason that the luxury industry will restart, and that, unfortunately, sets the rhythm for the fashion industry. I’m not trying to be pessimistic, but I just don’t see how things will truly change, with this wonderful exception of less travel. I can’t imagine the large corporations saying to themselves, ‘Well, we were producing too many bags, so let’s start making clothes again, and, you know what, let’s make them reasonably priced.’ I just don’t see it happening.

Suzanne: No. In the meantime, perhaps we’ll at least see fewer fashion shows or fewer collections, because it’s my impression that we’d reached a veritable saturation point, both for consumers and for creatives, with the number of collections. If you worked with creatives, with the artistic directors of fashion houses, you realized that everyone was simply overloaded to the point of no longer knowing why or for whom they were designing. Was it for consumers or their own marketing directors?

Jean: I don't think you can criticize all marketing directors as, again, it's thanks to them that you no longer have to be haunted by the fear of poor sales figures. You no longer have to think, 'Oh my God, if I mess up two seasons, I'm over.' We rely on the judgement of these individuals who tell you, 'This is too creative' or 'You have to bring in some T-shirts with the logo because that's what pays the rent.' There are all sorts of absurd rules. Sweatshirts, for instance. We told Suzanne about this and she didn't want to believe it, but the minute you place a little triangle here [pointing to his chest], your sales drop by 40%. It's hard science and you shouldn't mock it, as thanks to these MDs, you can no longer fail spectacularly. In a way, we manage things just like Madonna, who releases a hit every year thanks to marketing. There's another image that I'm thinking about at the moment: it's Odysseus with his ears stopped with wax to avoid being seduced by the sirens and so shipwrecked. At what point do we in the studios say, 'OK, listen guys, you're all geniuses, but if we keep listening to you, then we are going to jeopardize our future.' So we plug our ears, we tie ourselves to the mast and we stop listening to the sirens. That's the balance that we're looking to strike between creativity and production. [Laughs]

Suzanne: My viewpoint comes more from the creative side, though I understand the commercial aspects of the business and the importance of factoring them in. And what I find, Jean, to be something of a shame is that the commercial side now overrides everything else. We see a lot of fashion houses where the requirements from the marketing departments are very clear: the right skirt length, the use of certain colours, trousers, et cetera. You have to tick boxes, which doesn't sit at all well with creatives. They try and their work ends up on the runway, but then you never see it in stores. I completely understand what you say about finding the balance, yet I still think that it's a shame that anything that is a touch more imaginative falls by the wayside. Working on more fanciful designs would allow these creatives to build their talent and foster their creativity, but if we keep offering the same product every season because it was a bestseller from the previous season, we will kill that creative soul that you can still find at fashion shows, but only find in small quantities in stores, if at all. Gradually, the voice of reason from marketing departments has completely taken over the creative. Currently, many fashion houses are complaining that their garments aren't selling anymore, and it's because customers are bored stiff with what's on offer. It's no longer interesting. For the past three or four seasons, we have been seeing the same fashion shows on repeat at most of the fashion houses. I understand your point, and I agree with you, but a little more creativity wouldn't hurt. What would be the harm in trying out a few eccentricities here and there? They could even make some sales, if only by accident.

> **'Designers have been overloaded to the point of no longer knowing why or for whom they're designing. For consumers or their own marketing directors?'**

Jean: [Laughing] You're right, I know, I know. But…

Suzanne: Just imagine you have a fluorescent-pink item that turns out to be an unexpected hit in the shops and you tell yourself, 'Damn, we didn't stock enough of those. We're out of luck because they're selling like hot cakes.'

Jean: To illustrate Suzanne's point, take the example of Bottega Veneta with their last season, six or eight months ago. They put bags on the market that didn't tick any of the boxes prescribed by the marketing doctors. I mean, everything has a special name; it's like in American psychiatry, they discover new symptoms all the time. There was the cross-shoulder thingy, a bag for the first date, a bag to pay the mistress in Hong Kong. You know, at Louis Vuitton, there was a format of bag for Hong Kong businessmen who have a mistress on the mainland.

Suzanne: Come on, really...?

Jean: Really! I'm not making this up. [Laughs] The bag that is expensive, but not as expensive as the bag you give your wife. To get back to the point, it just so happens that Bottega released these bags that didn't tick any of the boxes and sold really well; so well that they sold out. So, it can happen, it really can happen, but those occasions are few and far between, unfortunately. I know it might not look like it, but it frustrates me just as much as anyone else. Sometimes I also dream up creative ideas and look at them through the commercial lens, and it's not even the commercial department, it's Judith herself who tells me, 'Drop it, it will never work.'

Suzanne: Why though? Surely, you can treat yourself to one or two eccentricities a season? Or do you put on the marketing glasses straight away each time and just let it drop. I mean, you're the boss after all.

Jean: I let it drop, because I am cynical and I end up telling myself, 'OK, she's right, just drop it.'

Suzanne: Even for one or two eccentricities? I don't know, I just think it could be worth...

Jean: The grip that marketing has on fashion houses is what's making fashion boring. It's almost like a drug. The CEOs of the large brands are like drug users, in a way. They have found a type of heroin with zero physical side effects. The only side effect is that they are less creative, and in order to settle their debt with the conscience of their creatives, they gift him or her a fashion show: 'Here you go, my dear. Let loose! You can do as you please!' They buy his or her conscience that way, so the designer isn't too ashamed of themselves.

> **'A.P.C. is far from a billion, but that still leaves you a big ship to sail. I'd never want to become too massive. It's not something that would give me satisfaction.'**

Suzanne: But don't you think that at some point, something can become unhinged in the mind of an artistic director of a fashion house who realizes the disconnect in designing for no valid reason. The clothes don't end up anywhere. The best form of recognition is when people want to wear your clothes.

Jean: And that's precisely how their psychoanalysts make their fortune. The creatives just have to attend a few sessions: 'What am I doing with my life? I have good ideas, I'm good at my job, but my skills aren't used. I'm just part of the decoration...'

Suzanne: It's like being the costume designer for a play that's only performed once...

Jean: This type of idea would never go out on a mainstream platform. You could never speak your mind freely to the general public about the isolating loneliness of fashion designers when confronted with the mega-trusts for whom they work, because that very same mega-trust is fascinated by profit. It's as if they get a rush after a sniff of heroin. The figures go from 300 million to 500 million. What a rush! And then they set their sights on the 1 billion mark and are elated because maybe they can reach 1 billion. Set against that backdrop, the creatives pale into insignificance.

Thomas: Jean, if I understand correctly, you've always sought to keep a sense of proportion in terms of your firm's growth, always tried to keep it at a 'humanly accessible' scale, right? That's very appealing as the antithesis of the prevailing ideology within the fashion world today, where everyone wants to reach the 10 billion mark. It's the new Wild West. You've never indulged in that particular form of hubris, although you could have easily taken that path. I'm not doing a character analysis, but your case is fascinating as there aren't many out there like you.

Jean: Restraint… But we have still amassed a certain size. When you're faced with paying the leases for 84 stores and points of sale, you find yourself saying, 'I'm not that small after all.' We're far from a billion, but that still leaves you quite a large ship to sail. I would never want to become too massive. I mean, it's not something that would give me any particular satisfaction. You know, when I was young and revolutionary, I was very much influenced by a sentence from Lenin. It was in an article in *Pravda* in March 1923, before he pushed forward with his new economic policy, at a time when he realized that his dogmatic model wasn't really working. The sentence refers to the development of the state apparatus, and it is about the only thing that I kept of Marxism in the end. In French, the sentence is: *Mieux vaut moins, mais mieux.* [Better fewer, but better.][1] I've always known that keeping the focus on the qualitative aspect would allow us to stay in the game. In fact, this crisis has left us on our knees, but due to our organization, we've not collapsed to the ground. A lot of people are completely floored; they've had the rug completely pulled from beneath them. In my case, we already have the prototypes for Spring/Summer 2021, which will be presented at the online fashion week in June, but I have counterparts who have not even produced their prototypes for summer 2021.

Thomas: And who will go under.

Jean: Yes. I'm pretty sure there are going to be lots of companies who do. It's possible. Not the big corporations, but the small and medium-sized ones.

Thomas: I have a question for you, Suzanne, which relates to A.P.C., too, in terms of aesthetic philosophy. You often employ the terms, 'the new normal' and 'the new simplicity'. But neither term corresponds to what you were saying earlier about why we don't see unconventional, experimental, creative fashion. Is there a paradox there?

Suzanne: I don't think so, because 'the new normal' can mean everything and anything; it's just what's become the new standard at the time. As for 'the new simplicity', it's quite similar. What I meant before, when I was talking about creativity, doesn't necessarily mean extravagance, which doesn't really correspond to my tastes. My point about creativity was about not being stuck on repeat and, in relation to marketing, not always reproducing the item you made the previous season, just two centimetres longer and in a different colour. It's true that I use 'new simplicity' often, but it's a term I used a lot before the crisis because I had reached a kind of overload of too much of everything. In terms of fashion and fashion imagery, I wanted to move towards more simplicity, more minimalism and classicism. Everything seemed to have reached a point where people in fashion found everything distasteful, but just continued as usual as they didn't know what other option they had. And there was this desire to move away from all of that and towards the more classical values of simplicity and normality, as they were the values that we were missing. I think that these months of quarantine have really given us an appreciation of the simple things that we should cherish. At least to begin with – and this echoes what Jean was saying before – we're going to move towards safe bets. I'm not talking about the shows, because they have become 10-minute entertainment spectacles that don't correspond to the notion of simplicity or normality because they no longer have any true meaning.

> **'The best-known models are almost like silent-era actresses. They manage to give off something surprising just by being themselves.'**

Jean: We have shared an analysis of that situation for some time now, but can we imagine an industry that would forego staging them? Do you sincerely believe that might change?

Suzanne: No, probably not. But they'll probably have to suspend the usual routine for at least six months. There won't be any shows in September, but perhaps this will bring about new ways of working. There will be a general need for everyone to devise new ways of presenting their garments.

Jean: Ultimately, the old ways will return one day. Someone's bound to suggest staging a show on a cruise to Kyoto or something, and it will start again just as before. It's like *Doctor Strangelove*…

Suzanne: But they won't have any more money, will they? I mean, they won't have a spare 10 million to ship everyone across the world to the location. Don't you think? You need serious resources for that kind of exercise, and I just don't know if they will still have that kind of money.

Jean: The large groups will still have the means to pull it off, that's for sure.

Thomas: Take the infamous example, the one everyone was talking about, even on the evening news, when Hermès reopened its store in Guangzhou. The shop took €2.5 million in one day.[2] People jumped at the chance to become consumers again. I personally didn't think people would change their habits, and in that instance it was plain to see that they hadn't. I doubt that the big corporations will question their methods for presenting and publicizing products once the wave has passed. I don't see why things would change, despite the fact that we have all realized the absurdity of the status quo. It's paradoxical: the shows are put on for an audience that isn't the final consumer, so what is their point? The shows are actually pretty unimpressive once they've been photographed or filmed with an iPhone. Despite all the resources and staging that are pumped into them, they are only really impressive when you're actually there.

Suzanne: Those live transmissions are so unimpressive; they're done purely by default. They set up a live transmission for the sake of it, but no one has really taken the time to think it through properly. No one has actually sat down to imagine how it could be effective onscreen. In fact, if you were to stage a show – a fashion show or any kind of show – specifically to be filmed for social media, it would have to be conceived completely differently and then might not be as effective for the people actually there. In theory, I think there are two distinct ways of proceeding. It's a subject still to be examined.

Jean: Now's the time to come up with a superb idea for how to do it.

Suzanne: That's not the only issue. The problem that I've noticed often, and which is a real blind spot, is acting. No one seems to give it any thought, but the models don't know how to act. Thomas, I imagine you have found yourself in situations like this at times, where a photo shoot is followed by filmed footage. It's not the models' fault, but they don't know how to act and they're not directed properly. That's why it ends up looking totally cheesy and the films we produce feel cheap. It's true! You're in stitches laughing, but no one knows how to direct them! The photographers don't know how to direct the models; they know how to give them directions for a photo shoot, but not for action or movement. I often advise models to take acting lessons. It's a skill that they'll need. Everyone is taking photos, yet films get the most views on Instagram and social media, much more than photos.

Thomas: I've been saying it for a while and it's curious that huge brands with their unlimited resources haven't made forays into film. If you spend tens of millions on a show, you could make a really beautiful film for the same amount. It's not rocket science. Remember when the big brands decided to get involved in architecture. They said to themselves, 'Who are the big-name architects? We'll give them a call and set things in motion.' It was no more complicated than that. If you belong to a big house, there's nothing preventing you from redirecting your budget towards films in order to present products.

> **'Instead of runway shows, in the 19th century, reps of the big couturiers would travel to the European courts with suitcases filled with little dolls.'**

Jean: What you describe is more or less possible with architecture, but literature, cinema, poetry – all the major artforms – require a kind of magic that money can't buy.

Thomas: Surely, you could call up, for example, Lars von Trier and say, 'Can you make a film for me?'

Jean: Yes, but he's going to be prejudiced against you. Not you, personally, but you know what I mean. He could easily decide, 'I'm not going to prostitute myself. I'm going to take the money and run.' The problem is also that they would never give the director carte blanche. The problem is that at some point in the filming, someone is going to insist, 'The bag has to be in the shot.'

Suzanne: But that's exactly what already happens with product placement in films. Take James Bond, for instance; it's a massive exercise in advertising.

Jean: James Bond is different; James Bond is God.

Suzanne: Sure, but the films contain loads of product placement! And it's more than noticeable. He's God, so perhaps the product placement isn't such a big deal. Saying, 'The bag needs to be in the shot', is not that different.

Jean: OK, so perhaps we can make a little film where we tell Jean-Luc Godard, 'The bag has to be in the shot.' We'll see.

Suzanne: Excellent! I've just had a great idea, Jean, for a film with a bag. I'll tell you about it later, but it's a great idea!

Thomas: It's actually really refreshing that out of nowhere, in response to a question, we can imagine solutions that could make our way of working much more interesting. I find that really intellectually stimulating.

Suzanne: Yes, when we have time to actually think about it properly. I pity all those people who are overwhelmed with Zoom calls, WhatsApp messages, constant meetings. It's got to be tough. I find that difficult situations, with limitations and little money, are often when we are most creative. In any case, when we have too many resources at our disposal, too much freedom and free rein, I'm not sure that as creatives, we're on our best form.

Jean: It's true. To give you an example from our brand. I consider that the future should actually be a mixture of incredible high tech, with all the impressive features available in virtual format, and the 19th century. So for the virtual fashion week in June, we're going to cut the fabrics used in the collection into small swatches to emulate the swatch boards used in 19th-century mail-order fashion catalogues. These swatch boards will be sent to each of our 350 wholesale clients and I'll include a handwritten note in an envelope with a personalized wax seal.

Thomas: You know they also used to send dolls. You could to do that, too.

Jean: Ah yes, the dolls to display the different looks.

Suzanne: No – really?

Thomas: Yes, in the 19th century, representatives of the large couturiers would travel to the European courts with suitcases filled with little dolls.

Suzanne: Barbie dolls?

Thomas: Any kind of doll. Given the time available, perhaps they would be Barbie dolls, but it's up to you.

Jean: A Wes Anderson animated film, for example.

Suzanne: Yeah, with Barbie dolls. Brilliant. Dressed in A.P.C. Can you imagine?

Jean: A.P.C. and Barbies: that's quite a marriage!

Suzanne: Jean is noting it down.

Jean: I was just tidying my papers!

Suzanne: I have a question for you both. You've already partly answered it, but do you really think that everyone will want to jump back on to the consumerist bandwagon at the end of lockdown? Do you want to become a consumer again?

Jean: Personally, I want to become a consumer of what I left in my wardrobe in Paris and haven't been able to

‘In my view, fashion has become much more of a B2B network, to use the popular term; a profession that today involves tens of thousands of people.’

wear. I don’t have a never-ending stock of clothes with me here in the countryside. I’m even in the process of cutting up garments to make some shorts. I might even make some djellabas in wool canvas as evening wear. In my case, Suzanne, I don’t think I’m a good example; I’m not a big consumer.

Thomas: I’m not at all a consumer of fashion; I’m a consumer of clothes, of course, but that’s different. And you, Suzanne?

Suzanne: No, not really. It scares me, in fact. At the moment, I get my kicks by just going to the pharmacy and buying toothpaste and deodorant. As the days and weeks have gone by, I have the impression that there are certain things that no longer have the same importance. It’s a weird feeling. It’s the sensation that something has deflated; fallen flat, in fact. That being said, I don’t think my consumption was exactly opulent, either.

Jean: Let’s be honest, Suzanne, and it’s not a criticism, but you are an excellent consumer. You embody the fashion industry’s saving grace. I say that with no irony whatsoever. When I see you sauntering towards me with a new bag, I know instinctively that you have spotted the right bag to have at that point in time.

Suzanne: That’s part and parcel of my work. Jean, perhaps you’re misreading me a bit. I *have* to have the right bag because my job is precisely to give you the impression that, ‘Suzanne’s got the right bag; she has good taste and she’s someone that I need to work with.’ My clothes are my window display.

Jean: Absolutely. When I see Judith arriving with more packages, I don’t say anything, but she can tell by my demeanour that I am surprised, and then she tells me calmly, ‘Jean, this is my job, and if I lose interest in clothes, it wouldn’t make sense anymore…’

Thomas: So, Suzanne, are you saying that you’ve lost interest in that at the moment? As it’s linked to your profession, which is somewhat on hold, you no longer need it as much as before?

Suzanne: Perhaps, yes. But another question I’ve been thinking about is what are we going to want to show the world in our fashion shoots after this? What kind of images are people going to want to look at?

Jean: It’s a valid question. For example, at the moment, I have an e-mail account called ‘press’ where I receive all my publications, and I really can’t bring myself to open it. It’s as if that belongs to the world before. That was before and what’s going to be the new representation of fashion now? For me, it’s a blank page.

Thomas: Which circles back to what we were saying earlier, do you actually believe that there will be a before and an after?

Suzanne: I think we’re already in the after, Thomas. The situation won’t be as it was before – we’re already in the after without fully realizing or comprehending it yet. The after is the here and now. Not the lockdown itself, but all the rest: protecting yourself; the fear of catching the virus; the fear that you might contaminate someone close to you; the wearing of masks; physical distancing. We’re already living in the after.

Jean: Perhaps the solution is to work with actors, even for photo shoots, not even for films, as they will convey an idea or a sensation in the photo. Perhaps that’s what was missing: an emotion that wasn’t being acted out with all of these exquisite photos with exquisite models in exquisite hotels. In the end, you sometimes still had the impression that the model was a call girl who didn’t know what the hell she was doing there. Perhaps it’s time we rethink and reimagine a format where the emotion is palpable on the model’s face and facial expression.

Suzanne: I agree with you. Once again, it’s a question that was needling me before all of this, but what does fashion photography mean today? In the sense that, in the past, fashion photography consisted of catalogue images so that women could keep abreast of what was going to be in fashion. It was all about catalogues, in fact. Nowadays I don’t know a single woman who leafs through photo shoots for the same reason. No one looks at photo shoots to choose the fashion they’ll buy; it just doesn’t happen that way. I’m sabotaging my own job, but it’s time we reinvented it because it no longer makes sense. The women I know all follow Instagram influencers and who is wearing what and what they want to buy. That’s what they’re looking at. So for those fashion photos in hotel rooms and such like, I’m not at all sure that the woman of today desires that dream, or wants to project herself into that type of image. The images we were producing before were already part of the past, yet we were still caught in it. Didn’t you have that impression?

Thomas: I had the impression that we were relishing irony, which is always a guilty pleasure but a pleasure all the same. In my view, we’ve become much more of a B2B network, to use the popular term; a profession that today involves tens of thousands of people.

Suzanne: Well said.

Thomas: The profession, the fashion industry, has now grown to be who-knows-how-many hundreds of thousands of people, and within this mix, they have all become ‘little experts’ about one another. It’s almost like film lovers or something, where everyone is a know-it-all. We now have all these really young people who are ‘specialists’ of a fashion culture that starts roughly in the mid-1990s, and from then on, they know it all. They understand and are genuinely interested in all the meta-discourses about fashion. They keep up with the fashion community – the new model here, the new fad there – and the entire who’s who of fashion in a photo shoot: ‘Oh yes, she’s still a big make-up artist; he’s still the hairdresser of such and such; she is on the cover of this and that.’ All these preoccupations that 20 years ago were limited to the profession have mutated into a more general culture that has been widely ‘democratized’.

Jean: Yes, we’ve all become pandemic specialists.

Thomas: We’re all fashionologists!

Jean: It has indeed become a globalized conversation with 200,000 to 300,000 participants, some of whom have begun to utter a lot of platitudes. We can imagine that about a third of these individuals will lose their jobs. Take, for instance, the whole fashion community in New York, with all those totally useless fashion shows: all those brands from the kids of such and such family who went to Saint Martins and then organized a fashion show in New York that daddy wrote all the cheques for. All those utterly useless brands and the parasitic audience that goes with them will come to an end. Yet we don’t know in which direction we’re moving; we don’t know what fashion imagery will look like, except that we’ll have to have something much more substantial to convey with our images, and that’s why I agree so much with the concept of using actors.

Thomas: You’re both a little harsh with the profession. After all, you both contribute to varying degrees to adventures in fashion photography that are by no means crap. Suzanne, it’s not as if you only have brain-dead-looking models in your shoots... I find you both quite harsh because when fashion photography is amazing – which an infinitesimal fraction of it is – it is no less moving than other art forms. I don’t think that fashion photography, when it’s well done, is doing that badly.

Suzanne: The intention wasn’t to be harsh for the sake of it. I like to question myself and my work; I think it makes me progress. What I wanted to express was the sensation of overload that I experienced before the pandemic, and how I’ve questioned myself about how to take my work to a different place and a different level. In the end, the pandemic has provided me and others with the opportunity to rethink how we work, how to inspire emotion through a photograph made with the aid of a computer or to direct a model or an actor. These are the aspects of the situation that I find most fascinating and challenging. I didn’t want to be negative, in any case.

Thomas: I find your self-questioning extremely inspiring. I love being negative, by the way, but it seems to me that the best-known models, those who manage to stay in the game for a long time, are almost like silent-era actresses. They manage to give off something surprising just by being themselves. It’s like a strange skill they have. The big-name models quite often know how to act well. The problem today is that we’re talking about 16-year-old girls...

Suzanne: Exactly. It’s not their fault. They’re not even around for five years and have no time to grow at all.

Thomas: It’s not a question of skills; it’s simply a question of maturity, which makes the whole issue extremely delicate. Anyway, this has been really interesting.

Suzanne: Very enriching, thank you. We should do this once a week to advance our thought processes!

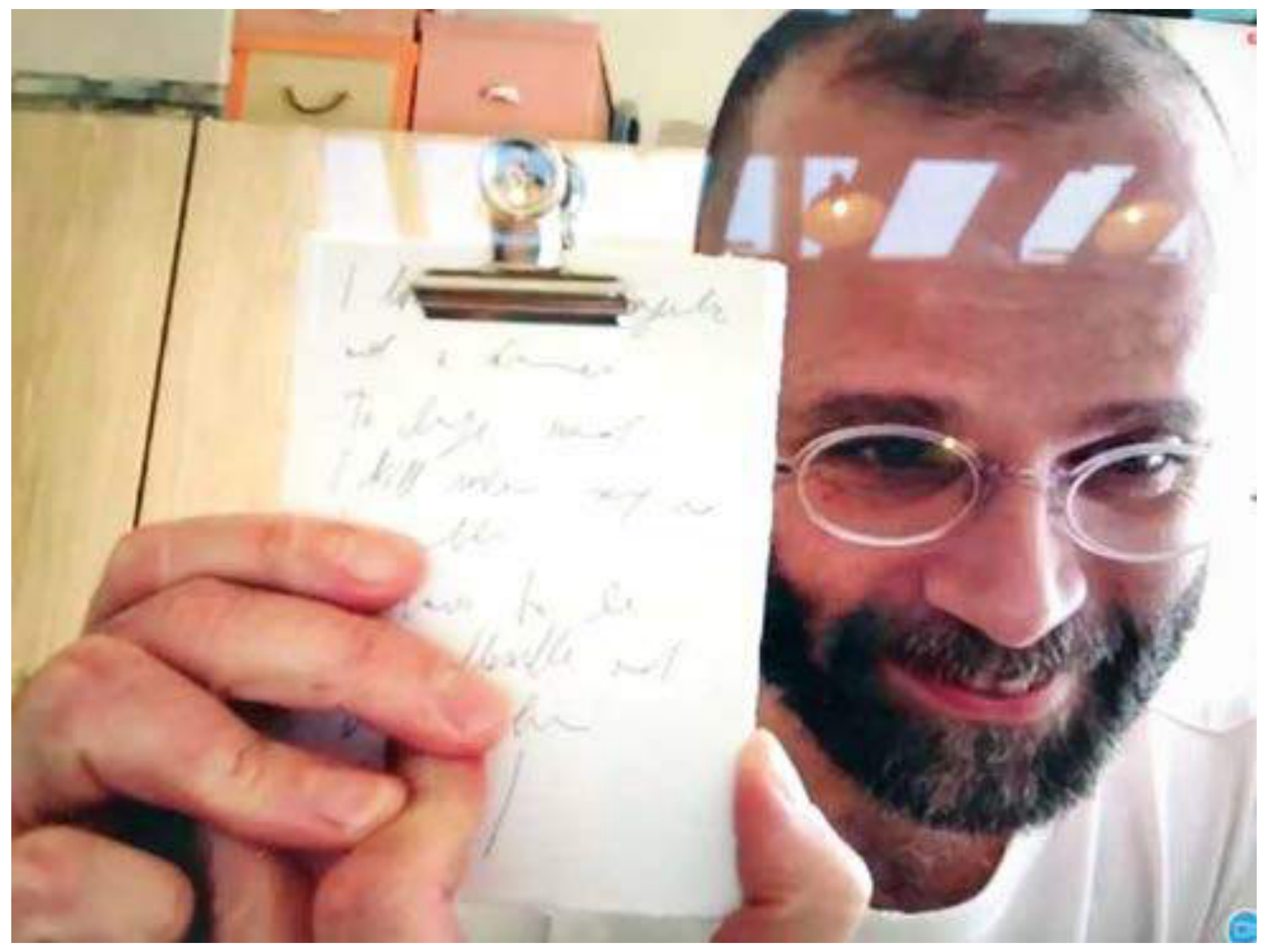
Thomas: Discussing all these subjects is really inspiring.

Jean: So, Thomas, what are you making for lunch?

1. Lenin wrote his article on 2 March 1923 and it was published on 4 March 1923 in the official Communist Party newspaper *Pravda*. Said to be the last document he wrote before his death 10 months later, it also contains an additional piece of advice for fashion designers: ‘we must follow the rule: “Measure your cloth seven times before you cut”.’

2. On its opening day on 11 April 2020, takings at the newly renovated Hermès flagship store in Guangzhou, the capital of China’s wealthiest province, were reported to have been CNY 19 million. This figure was probably inflated by Hermès importing a series of exclusive products for the opening, including, according to *WWD*, a ‘diamond-studded Himalayan Birkin’.

Silvia Venturini Fendi and Angelo Flaccavento



‘Nothing can surprise a true Roman; we have seen everything.’

Silvia Venturini Fendi and
Angelo Flaccavento,
in conversation, 7 May 2020.

Angelo Flaccavento: How are you?
Silvia Venturini Fendi: I’m well. I’m with my grandchildren, so it’s quite busy. I wouldn’t really call it self-isolation. We are all here; we decided to all be together in lockdown. I have been working, because the factories are open again, but there have also been moments with very little activity, when all I could do was dream about my work.
Angelo: Has it been difficult for you to slow down like this? As creative director, you’ve been on the go for years.
Silvia: Well, the first day was quite difficult; I was very scared about it. I had mixed emotions. For so long I had dreamed about having time for myself. I’d say, ‘If only I could stay at home for 10 days, I could reorganize all of my time.’ Now, next Monday, I’m finally going back to work, and I’ve been thinking about all of the things that I wanted to do with this time but didn’t. Really, I wanted to leave myself, abandon myself, express myself; really experience this lockdown, in a way. I thought it was an interesting experience to feel boredom, which was something I used to think when I was a little girl, too, during my holiday time; afternoons without anything to do, just looking at things and daydreaming.

‘I’ve been dressed in Fendi since I was four years old. I have everything, more or less. I stole so many things from my mother!’

Angelo: Do you think this moment of crisis will have a huge impact over the system in general? How will you cope?
Silvia: In a way, I think we were all expecting a change; hoping for a change. I think we will grab this opportunity to make it happen. We all felt that the pace we were following was too fast, especially from the creative point of view. I very often felt that I put a lot of effort into collections that deserved to stay out there for more time. I had so many friends tell me, ‘I went in, but it was sold out; there wasn’t my size; there wasn’t this item.’ Probably because things were moving so fast and a capsule collection was coming in. It was something that was already in the air. Even then, we were not doing presentations for pre-collections, for instance; we were already embracing something that was calmer. But the timing of the items, the life of the object, the design – it was really too short. Sometimes another pair of shoes is not called for, because the ones you just did were beautiful, and it’s by no means certain that the next ones you do will be as beautiful. But you had to refresh; you had to have new ideas. I think we will take this opportunity to express our vision in a different way, and to embrace something we used to have before: word of mouth. Somebody buys something, their friends see it and say, ‘I’d like to have that’, and they can still find it. Today, you have to be very fast: you have to go online immediately to get the one that you want, because you know that after two weeks it will be gone. I think it’s going to be a great opportunity to rethink the life of ideas, and not only objects.
Angelo: In this situation, do you think smaller brands might have bigger problems? In a way, because Fendi is part of a bigger conglomerate, it is safer than a smaller brand. The small brands are those in danger because they might not have the liquidity. How do you think they can survive now?
Silvia: Smaller brands are going to have many, many difficulties. It’s going to be very difficult for them, and that’s something that has to be solved on a political level. It’s something that our government should think about. But that takes time, and we know that in fashion timing is very short, and you have to react very quickly. I think they will have to change themselves, to reduce, but in this moment, perhaps people – customers and clients – will take a more careful approach to small or limited editions. I think some opportunities can arise from a moment of crisis; I want to be optimistic for them, perhaps about reducing, or concentrating on certain types of collection, and on specific point of sales. I’ve heard about so many young designers who have had problems with big concept stores or department stores that buy a collection and are then late with payments. For a small brand, that’s a disaster. They may be obliged to reduce, and to think that small is beautiful, and not the opposite. Slow down a bit and really be very careful about every step you take. That’s true for the small brands – but also big brands. In the end there is a question mark over everyone’s heads. This is a difficult moment, because we can’t do anything.
Angelo: You say the smaller brands might need political help. This will go out internationally, and non-Italian readers may not understand how little our government is interested in the fashion business, even though it is still one of the key sectors of the Italian economy. One would imagine that there would be a lot more coordination between the government and big brands, but this hasn’t happened. Why doesn’t it happen and what can be done?
Silvia: Big brands represent themselves; government should concentrate on and be very, very close to small brands. Besides the big international brands, there are a myriad of small family brands, especially in Italy. Big brands have big shoulders. They should stand by the side of the weak, not the strong – and they can do it. Technology has brought a redistribution of power. The young have to make the big brands scream, and maybe use different methods to work together as a team, which, in Italy, has been a difficult thing for previous generations to do. I think they should really share the experience and work together in a unified way to be heard.

‘If it’s good, it’s all thanks to me; if it’s bad, it’s all my fault. I might feel free, but I certainly feel the responsibility that comes with this freedom.’

Angelo: In general, are you scared of change or not?
Silvia: I’m not. I’m very excited by it; I love it. Challenges and change are what excite me. When you know something, all you can do is talk about it. When you don’t know, you can imagine it; you can dream about it. Especially for creative people, change makes you open doors that you would never have opened otherwise. It’s an opportunity.
Angelo: Apart from this period, what has been the biggest change in your professional life of late?
Silvia: I am now at the helm of the creative studio by myself.[1] This was quite a big issue for me. I’m still going through that transition. Fendi is going through a change, even if there is continuity.
Angelo: Being alone, have you felt free to express who you really are and what your real vision is? In the collection you showed in February in Milan, I felt as if I could see a creative person finding her own voice.
Silvia: Yes, good and bad. If it’s good, it’s all thanks to me; if it’s bad, it’s all my fault. You feel free, but that doesn’t mean that you feel more relaxed or happy. I really feel the responsibility with this freedom. But I take it on, totally.
Angelo: Are you one of those creative people who is always happy or one that is always thinking?
Silvia: I’m never happy; it’s a bit of a problem. That’s why I really love this time by myself, though even that’s not really true. I think creative people often love isolation. They are not the most optimistic people. I don’t know why, but I’m never happy about myself. I always think I could have done more. I feel the responsibility to do things well, because I was raised by women who were very exacting. I always had to be the one to set an example to the team, to the people who were working at Fendi. My grandmother used to say, ‘You have to be the first to arrive in the morning and the last to go home. You have to be the first one who bends down to pick up the pins on the floor, to be the example to others.’ Those kinds of things have stayed with me. I’m always thinking that I can do more and more, and better. Only happy for a few seconds. There are moments in the run-up to the show when you can feel that people are happy. Just for a moment, you know; a second later, you’re in tears… That’s thanks to Karl, who was worse than my grandmother, because like him, I immediately think, ‘On to the next one’, so the happiness evaporates immediately. Or you think, ‘It was so good that now it will be even more difficult to do better.’ You are happy to have success, but you are also unhappy and scared; you will work more and you will suffer more. After the show, you read the reviews, and start thinking, ‘I should have done something different. They didn’t understand. I was stupid.’ You see? I am very committed.
Angelo: As a person, are you more of a pragmatist or an escapist?
Silvia: I would describe myself as both. I like to be pragmatic, and I am pragmatic because I’m the kind of woman who leads the family. I had to be pragmatic because I couldn’t just dream; I had to act. I had my children, and I basically raised them by myself. My husband was never very good at those kinds of relationships, so it was a mess. In the end, what I achieved, I achieved by myself. But, of course, even today, at my age, and after so many years of work at Fendi, I dream about what I’ll do the day I stop, how I can bring myself back. I still have dreams, thank God. I still make projects. I dream a lot, but I’m also very, very rational.
Angelo: Do you consider yourself a rebel?
Silvia: I consider myself to be someone who is always ready to change her mind, to change her ideas. I will never rule anything out, and I will never rule anything in; I’m always open to being

convinced. I'm ready for new experiences and ready to change my convictions. I am open-minded and I like to embrace new things and to challenge myself.

Angelo: Talking of which, have you thought about how you will present collections in the immediate future?

Silvia: I daydream about that. I'll think about doing things one way, and then I'll think that that won't be possible. Sometimes you have ideas, and the next minute, you think they can't happen; we can't go there, we can't do that. You have to be very flexible right now; you have to explore your options and be crazy enough to jump into a new adventure at the last minute, too. I'm exploring different options, according to the rules that we will have. Certainly, I want to try a new way of doing things.

Angelo: Do you think this crisis will make people want something more real or more virtual?

Silvia: Both. You asked me if I was more of a pragmatist or a dreamer; I think we are all both. We have to be pragmatic, because life is very tough, so we have to have a clear idea about reality. But at the same time, you need imagination; that has to have a big space in our lives. I'm very attracted by the unknown. We all want to be explorers, to explore new ways and new ideas, or to listen to ourselves in a new way and feel new emotions. That's what I think is important for all of us. People will always need to dream, especially now that things are going to be tough. We need an escape valve, an exit strategy.

Angelo: How are you dealing with deadlines that must now be completely up in the air?

Silvia: You have to be flexible; you have to know that you cannot drive the car by yourself. In a way, it's very Roman; the world has become very Roman. Around September, hopefully we will be working on and presenting a collection. Maybe. I don't know. Those are the words today. It's like that, lately. When we were in Milan for the last show, even a few days before we didn't know if we could show, and we had to think of other options. When you have to scream, you learn how to scream.

Angelo: It's fun you telling me that the world is becoming very Roman, because when I was preparing for this interview, I said, 'Of course, Silvia is the best person to talk to because she's Roman, and Rome has been around forever.'

Silvia: Exactly. Rome is the best demonstration of the human journey and humanity's relationship with time. You can see how they have survived different situations, different times. You can witness that. If you are Roman, you have one more tool with which to react to this kind of situation.

Angelo: Do you feel like a true Roman?

Silvia: Yes. Nothing can surprise a true Roman; we have seen everything. There are so many stories about incredible people doing incredible things; who have achieved incredible goals and gone through horrible things, too. But then the beauty of it remains.

Angelo: How would you explain being Roman to someone who is not?

Silvia: When you are Roman, you are a bit snobbish. To impress a Roman person, you really need to make an effort. You are a bit spoiled. You have this approach that says nothing is important. You are relaxed; you take things as they come, nothing can affect you.

Angelo: Which is great.

Silvia: Which is great, and perhaps difficult to understand for other people. For the moment, it's quite good.

Angelo: Has being on your own, isolated from your team for such a long time put you in a contemplative mood about your past? Has it made you nostalgic?

Silvia: I started to look at my archives, and then I got bored. I look at things from the past, but I'm also avidly thinking about the future. I want to be part of this new world. I'm probably not nostalgic because I don't regret anything. When you have children and grandchildren you want to be part of the fight, and I'm very excited about embracing new ways. I want to see; I want to be there; I want to take an active part. So no, I'm not nostalgic. But there are things, like when I see something that reminds me of my childhood, such as when I told you how I felt bored – but even that is more sentimental than nostalgic.

Angelo: This is a side question, but you've mentioned your archive twice in this interview and I'm curious: do you have your archive in your house?

Silvia: This is my personal archive: clothes. I've been dressed in Fendi since I was four years old.

Angelo: You've kept it all.

Silvia: Yes, I have everything, more or less. I stole so many things from my mother! It involves a lot of work. I had to take care of everything. Especially because I have [daughters] Leonetta and Delfina and they were looking at things; they were in this and that. We were fighting for things.

'Another pair of shoes isn't always called for, because the ones you just did were beautiful, and it's by no means certain that the next ones will be as beautiful.'

Angelo: One of the most interesting aspects of the collection you showed in February was this idea of proper femininity as an expression of strength. That's quite a revolutionary or provocative thought these days. You were suggesting that a woman dressed like a woman, with a nipped waist, can be as powerful as a woman dressed as a man. Tell me more about that.

Silvia: Femininity and feminism can go together. Today, it's quite subversive to reclaim certain causes, and that's why I really wanted to play with the most obvious ones, the most banal causes, and make them relevant. As you mentioned before, women have a different approach to things, and in order to be relevant, you don't need to forget and deny them. I didn't want to be nostalgic; it was more for the younger generation. It was a message of hope for them. For my generation, we had to fight more, we had to take from men in order to be noticed. But today I think we can be more relaxed about this and accept our femininity. It's a way of talking about feminine power in a personal way.

Angelo: Do you think that as a female designer you have a different approach to designing?

Silvia: Yes. I don't have the ideal woman in mind; I think more about women. I think a male designer has an unchanging idea of a woman. I am more practical in my approach. I don't need to think about an ideal woman, I think about myself. It's a faster process, more direct.

Angelo: What does success mean for you? Do you think about it?

Silvia: I hate this word 'success'. 'You are successful.' What does that even mean? It doesn't bring anything to me. It's like, 'What is luxury?' I don't like those kinds of words. You have to be relevant. Success is something ephemeral for me. How can you rely on success? There's something that Karl would always say. For instance, when we were looking at the work of a new designer who had created a good collection, he'd say, 'Yes, but success comes and goes.' You have to see long-term; you have to stay relevant.

Angelo: How do you do that?

Silvia: By being unhappy. If you are satisfied, the danger is that you'll say, 'I've made it.' I am humble about that. Fashion can give you the idea that you have achieved something, and that is dangerous. Sometimes I expressly force myself not to be in a place, not to go to a party because it could be dangerous to me and the way I think. 'Oh yes, you are a fantastic designer.' No, no, no, I don't want to play that game. You are successful when you are fulfilled and intimately happy and you know that you made every effort possible to make what you thought was good. Sometimes you are happy about something even when people don't like it, but it was still a success for you because you really believed in what you were doing. There have been collections that I was really happy with, and the reviews were not good. But if you believe in what you have done, you can believe you have been successful.

Angelo: One thing I like about Fendi – and I think it's down to you – is that when it was sold to LVMH and became so much bigger, it kept the authenticity of being an Italian family business, which is not a very easy balance.

Silvia: No, it's not easy. But family is not just the people we share bones or blood with; it's also the long-time relationships we have, the family we've chosen. When some of the designers who are no longer at Fendi talk about Fendi, you really feel that. When we meet, we are friends and we are more than friends, too. That makes me happy. Human relationships are so important to me. That's when I think, 'This is a success.' Especially when you know how tough it can be; you may have become rivals and competitors, but you still feel the importance of friendship.

Angelo: Have you ever tempted to run away from everything?

Silvia: Yes. Lots of times.

Angelo: Have you ever explored that?

Silvia: Yes, when I was young. Not when I was older, with children. That would have been problematic.

Angelo: Are you a pessimist or an optimist, or do you just forge ahead?

Silvia: I always live with a sense of catastrophe inside my head. I'm used to second-guessing myself. If it's not raining, I'll still tell the children to take three umbrellas. There's only a drop, but you might slip. On the other hand, life is so beautiful! I am enormously enthusiastic about life, but I do like to be very cautious.

Angelo: If this conversation was put in a box to be read in 10 years, what message would you leave for the reader?

Silvia: I'd include my phone number and get them to call me, because I'll definitely still be here.

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1. Silvia Venturini Fendi became the house's chief creative director after Karl Lagerfeld's death in February 2019. She had previously been creative director of menswear, accessories and children's wear.

Fabrizio Viti and Julie de Libran

‘Even after all these years of working in big brands, we have both been able to create and maintain our own independence.’

Fabrizio Viti and Julie de Libran in conversation, 8 May 2020.

Julie de Libran: How are you?

Fabrizio Viti: I am well. We have to speak English, even if me and you speaking English is very strange. It’s probably the first time.

Julie: We can add a few Italian words, if it’s easier. You have some nice flowers!

Fabrizio: They are all fake! But at least they don’t die and they last. You cut your hair?

Julie: I did it on my own; I got sick of it.

Fabrizio: How is confinement going, apart from cutting your hair?

‘Not having the rush of needing to produce something immediately makes you reflect a lot more about what it is you really like.’

Julie: I cannot complain. We are lucky because we were already in the country and ended up staying here. We are surrounded by nature; I feel very lucky.

Fabrizio: I’ve been doing designs and sketches, even though the factories are closed. Not as much as I usually do, but I keep going. Are you designing, too?

Julie: Of course. It’s amazing to have so much time in front of you and to have no deadlines. I sketch a lot at night and to feel like there are no meetings, no people waiting for you, is incredible. To have all this time to think more and lose yourself in sketching, without being interrupted. It’s quite amazing.

Fabrizio: Without being interrupted, I was thinking that as well. It is very interesting to sketch without the pressure of having to do a sample immediately, like, which zip, which leather? Right now, we can at least sketch something and think twice about whether we like it or not. That’s so interesting and hasn’t happened in the past 20 years.

Julie: It’s nice to be more freestyle and to sketch what comes out of your head without the need to make sense; to adapt it to what is going on and to what we really need.

Fabrizio: We are doing a mental editing, which is good. Just not having the rush of producing something immediately makes us reflect more about sketches and what we like. There won’t be a need for too many things out there for the next couple of seasons, which is also interesting.

Julie: Absolutely, to edit and to create what you really love and desire, and with a certain quality and know-how. Being even more selective.

Fabrizio: We first met at the Marangoni school [in Milan], when we studied there. You are younger than me I have to say; I was in the final year and you were in the first. And we have been friends ever since. I was thinking about Milano in those years; it was quite fun.

Julie: We would go dancing! There was a movement in the 1990s, which was really an expression of how people were wearing clothes in Milan then. Fashion is really an important part of the culture, the colours and the fabrics there...

Fabrizio: In Milano at the time – and even now, because Milano is very good again – there were lots of brands and people are aware of fashion. Especially in the club scene, because people like us were studying or working for the brands and then we would go out and have fun. I remember that very well, it was very fun. And then we found ourselves at Prada, and the fun was done; we were locked in the office there!

Julie: It was just work, work, work, but such a good school. Necessary I think. Do you still use what you learned from those experiences today, even after all those years in other companies?

Fabrizio: Of course. They were our formative years and I still retain many of the things I learned there. Do you remember? It was me, you, Fabio Zambernardi, Stefano Pilati, and Alessandra Facchinetti. It was a good moment.

Julie: It was a great time; I have great memories of all those years of so much work and construction. Thinking back to Prada then and looking at it now, it has stayed so true to its image and aesthetic. That fashion discipline is definitely an example.

Fabrizio: At the time, if you remember, Prada was seen as something strange: too basic, too nun-like, not sexy, too minimal. Before that became the key to Prada – because the genius of Signora Prada is always to be different.

Julie: That is why I was brought there, too; I was hired to bring some more sexiness and femininity to the collections?

Fabrizio: I remember, and you did it very well, because there was a need for it at the time. It was great and also very difficult, as we know, because the pressure was so high.

Julie: Many years later, I was in New York and went to the Met to see the Prada-Schiaparelli exhibition.[1] The pieces we all worked on at Prada were there and it was quite extraordinary to see them in an exhibition; they’ve became part of the history of fashion and the art of costume. It’s wonderful that they have lasted and are shown as an example for the next generation to learn from.

Fabrizio: Like you are so old that something you do is in the museum! [Laughs] Was it me who introduced you to Marc Jacobs?

Julie: Not physically, but I know you told him about me because I was still at Prada. At the time, my life was between Milan and Paris. I had an appointment with Marc to join the team, so your team as well. We saw each other and then we met again in Paris at Louis Vuitton, and they were also incredible years: a lot of work and incredible times to create incredible shows. That is one of the talents that Marc really brings to fashion: his attention to detail and the way he can really put on a show!

‘Thinking back to Prada then and looking at it now, it has stayed so true to its image and aesthetic. That fashion discipline is definitely an example.’

Fabrizio: I remember I once spoke to Marc and I thanked him very much because I never thought that working in fashion could also mean working on Broadway! We were setting up shows that were like Broadway shows; they lasted 11 minutes, but were emotionally and visually so strong. I think what I learned most from Marc is to have fun and feel joy, not fun in a stupid way, but to create something that people can understand and enjoy. It was also really interesting how we used to spend sleepless nights and would just fall asleep…

Julie: Just a couple of minutes before the show! It was 8.30 in the morning and we hadn’t slept and the show was at 10am, across the road, so we sat in the entrance and had a 10-minute power nap.

Fabrizio: Right in the entrance and I remember a girl from Louis Vuitton came over to me and said, ‘*Monsieur, monsieur*, you can’t sleep here!’ And I was like, ‘I’m not homeless – I work here!’ You were sleeping as well and then you were like, ‘We have to go, the show is now!’ It was a great time. I am still happy to be at Vuitton, because I am having a fantastic time with Nicolas, even after 16 years.

Julie: It’s incredible. I think you deserve a medal for 16 years service, and more to come. You’re definitely now one of the columns holding up the building!

Fabrizio: I’ve gained weight over the years, so I really am a column now! I love to eat, but I don’t know how to cook and the restaurants are closed.

Julie: You have been cooking? I am proud of you!

Fabrizio: Thank you, I have been cooking, cleaning the house and watching two episodes of *Charlie’s Angels* every night.

Julie: Just two? Not more?

Fabrizio: No, because I want to make them last in case there is another lockdown! You never know! I’m also dealing with my own brand, as you do every day. We’ve already spoken about this, but this is a very intense moment. We are selling shoes on our website like never before, so this is a very good moment for us, but we are also trying to keep up with the future collection. Next season will be very intense...

Julie: We are both very lucky because our companies are small enough that we can stay really close to the products, the editing, the way things are decided and done. We are very lucky in this time to be able to make the right decisions and to focus on the priorities. I am also lucky because I have created a brand that is very intimate. It is just dresses and we can have one-to-one appointments, so it is something also very private. Online is not the easiest thing for me; I am more of a tactile person. I like to try things on and I like the experience of going somewhere and having the time. So once we are able to all move more, we should be able to restart once we have the security measures in place.

Fabrizio: Of course, it will.

Julie: Like you, I am wondering what people will want to wear once all this reopens and people start going out and meeting up again. Maybe they will have more private dinners at the beginning because restaurants, hotels and travel are not going to open quite yet. So what will people want to wear? What type of shoes will they be looking for? Something more comfortable or something with some more decoration, but still comfortable?

Fabrizio: Maybe more personal and less show-off, I think. Women will want to wear something they really like. My brand has always been for women; it is not done for the men. As Katie [Grand] used to say, the shoes are not man-catchers. My shoes are for women who choose what they want and buy them for themselves. Lately we have been doing really well with clogs, which is a sign, because clogs are easy to wear. They have a very laid-back attitude, not like the red-carpet shoes. What is important for both of us, and that I admire, is that even after all these years of working in big brands, we have been able to create and maintain our own independence, right? We always said we’d do that when we were younger, and here we are. Did you expect it would be so hard?

Julie: With 30 years of experience in this industry, I can say that I think it's always been hard, but when you are so passionate and so dedicated, you just don't calculate any of it. You don't calculate the time you spend doing it, you just give yourself to it because you just love it so much; it is such a passion. I feel like every experience I have had has been hard because with fashion you never know. Every day is a new day; every day you have to prove yourself. It is creativity and it is fashion and it is of the moment. The new label just felt the right thing for me to do now – it has been almost a year – it felt right to really express my values, what my brand should be about. It is responsible fashion; I am only doing dresses and only using upcycled fabrics; it is about very narrow and limited editions, all numbered. It is small and that is how I wanted it to be. My lifestyle and my upbringing were always very organic and natural. I just didn't want to keep making stuff that wasn't useful or necessary any more; I just wanted to focus. I made this decision, but even so, it is hard because sometimes I would like to make more. Like I love men's jackets and I would like to make more of them, but since I am doing it on my own, I am trying to stay as focused as possible, and be true to my values and ideas. I want to take the time and then later expand. What's hard too is that you have to be involved in all aspects of the brand: the numbers, the cost of everything…

Fabrizio: We are not really used to that! Sometimes I am designing something and I say to myself, I think I should put two daisies fewer and then I say, but why? Then the answer is because they cost one euro each. As modern designers, we were always aware of costs, even at Louis Vuitton, but with your own brand, you have to be careful about so many things. I knew the situation before I started, but I am still surprised how hard it is to deal with the emotional side, being out there with your name on products. Sometimes they are a success and sometimes a disappointment; you do things that you believe in and then no one cares about it. Also, it's really different when it is under another brand than when it carries your own name.

Julie: It's also about communication, all your social media. It's important, even if we are both far more interested in the quality of the work and the product, the art of what we are doing, rather than communicating about it.

Fabrizio: We are a generation of designers raised on the idea of the importance on the product, and not ourselves. I have never used the brands I worked for to promote myself, and I don't use my brand to promote myself personally. I do promote my work, though; I like to communicate, but for me the *fashion* is there to communicate. It is a language, my own language that I use to reflect on the women around me and what I think women may like.

Julie: It's self-expression. I now realize that I got into this business because I needed it as an expression of my thoughts and being very shy, it was a way to...

Fabrizio: You were never very shy! When we met, your décolleté was very exposed! You are shy and not shy. I remember when you were jumping on your scooter in Milano hitching up your skirt in a very sexy way!

Julie: I think that is part of it – I am shy in terms of communicating, but I was able to express myself through my clothes. The way I wore things and put things together was a form of expression.

Fabrizio: No complaining; everyone was very happy!

Julie: Thank you! What do you think image is going to be like when we get out of this? How important do you think image is going to be in terms of what we are putting out there? Basically, it's creativity versus marketing: do you think people will be more tempted by the image or the creativity that is coming from a designer?

> **'I'm still surprised how emotional it can be to have your name on products. You sometimes do things you believe in but then no one else cares about it.'**

Fabrizio: As we all know marketing is very important because it is a guideline for a designer, but then the guideline can be broken, you can go in the opposite direction. We know that very well!

Julie: It's often our strength, right?

Fabrizio: The guidelines people show you are often what they know, so that means what you did the season before. They can't show you what you haven't done. So it is up to us to break the guideline and make them understand that the next thing could be better than the one we did before. That is a key point and they say, 'But these are selling well.' And I always say, 'Yes because they are in stores! That's why they sell!' I hope that people will care more about quality and choosing what they really like instead of following a certain type of trend. We have been overwhelmed by the trend of sneakers or huge oversized coats, and at some point everything and everyone looks alike. You see these oversized creatures with oversized shoes and straight hair in front of their faces walking around and you are like, is that her or another one? I hope and I think that people will instead choose what suits them best. Lately, even in shoes I don't think that people were looking at what could fit them best, but saying, 'OK, this is the shoe this season and we have to go with that.' I am like, 'But with your feet, you really shouldn't wear those sandals!' [Laughs] So, I want something with more logic; I like the word logic right now. To me it means you do whatever is good for yourself and you aren't nervous about whether you are part of something or not. Though fashion has always been like that; I mean, when we were teenagers we were all looking for the Fiorucci jeans because everybody had Fiorucci jeans, at least in my world. But I couldn't afford them, so I was like cutting out the label and gluing it on cheap jeans!

Julie: Something that I think we have also always had in common is femininity. You like beautiful things and that feminine womanly side, with more detail, decoration and glamour. I feel like we are both attracted to that. I don't think that will ever go away because women want to feel like women.

Fabrizio: You always say that and you are a women, so for me that is very important! As you know I am not a fan of street style and so on, even though it is something that exists so clearly and is a need women have. But I agree with you, I think that we are both very attracted by beauty. By women who express a kind of beauty in a classic way. Also, don't forget that we have often worked on the red carpets and there is also clearly a shared kind of Hollywood influence: you because you were raised in California and me because I was raised in Carrara and there was only TV and nothing else to do!

Julie: For many years we worked together designing the dresses and the shoes to dress all these glamorous women on the red carpets.

Fabrizio: Women can express their femininity in different ways – you know that better than me!

Julie: As you mentioned clogs, did you see the picture I posted of my clogs, my real countryside clogs. They are such a good shoe; they are my everyday shoes right now. So easy and tough, but at the same time feminine and sexy in a certain way.

Fabrizio: Clogs are very democratic. You know how much I love to be alone and to stay at home, so for me, this has a very good side. It is a disaster, too, but when you are in the middle of a disaster you have to find something good. For me, these couple of months have been the time for reflection. We will see things in a different way now. It is all about priorities.

Julie: Absolutely, and of being true to your values.

Fabrizio: Exactly. We've also probably learned that we can do this on the phone; we can use technology to work and don't have to travel every week. Next week we start again here in Paris and I am very, I don't want to say excited, but I am very curious. It will be interesting to see how we deal with all of this both at my company and also at Louis Vuitton, because it is something that no one has ever experienced. So even if the factories are reopening now and I can do samples for my own line, I will be much more aware of the fact that the factory can close anytime. Now we know that everything we do is a blessing. I have learned also to be happy and to complain less because everything can just disappear in weeks.

Julie: It definitely creates a new perspective about everything. We need to be a bit more responsible and waste less. We need to make better choices sometimes.

Fabrizio: I haven't been to McDonald's for two or three months, which is my way of being, of adjusting myself to the new rules!

Julie: And you said you've lost some weight, so you feel better.

Fabrizio: I do! I never did get you to go to McDonald's, right? I was never able to get you there.

Julie: No, no, I just can't.

Fabrizio: That is why I believe in your project, because you have never been to McDonald's with me!

Julie: Not once in 30 years, even though I grew up in America.

Fabrizio: You've been very true to your principles: growing up in America and never having McDonald's or Kentucky Fried Chicken is really something!

Julie: Yes, but you met my father, the discipline and the education, always eating very healthily, knowing where things come from was always important. This was fun!

Fabrizio: *Si*, it was. Thank you very much.

Julie: Stay safe.

Fabrizio: You, too. And buy the clogs!

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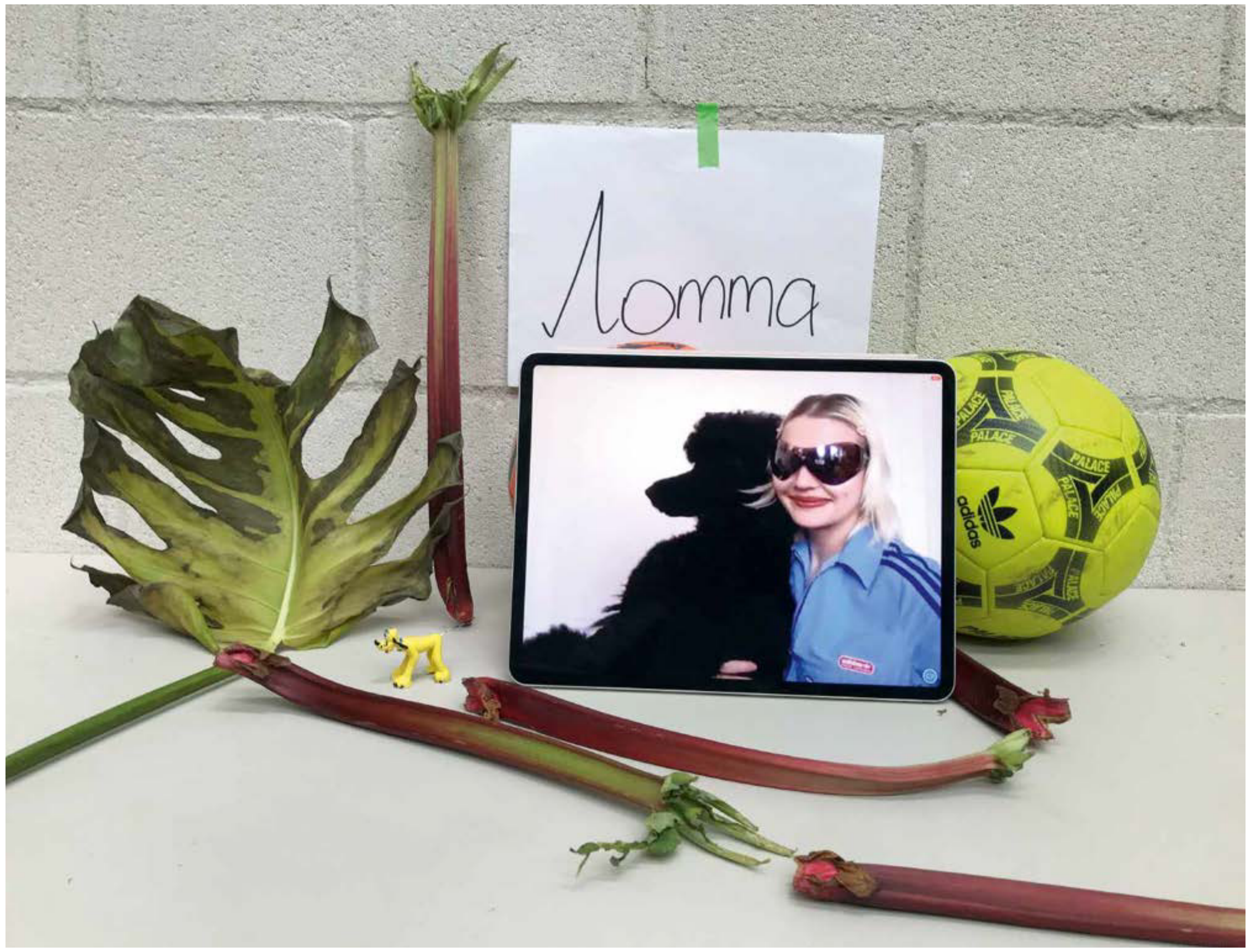
1. *Schiaparelli and Prada: Impossible Conversations*, which brought together work by Elsa Schiaparelli and Miuccia Prada in a dialogue, ran 10 May to 19 August, 2012, at the Met in New York.

Lotta Volkova and Gaia Repossi

Moderated by Marta Represa


Лотта
PALACE
adidas

‘It feels like we’re living in the 1960s, but with more technology.’

Lotta Volkova and Gaia Repossi
in conversation, 4 May 2020.
Moderated by Marta Represa.

Marta Represa: Where are you both?
Lotta Volkova: Paris.
Gaia Repossi: Both of us.
Marta: How have you been since all this began?
Gaia: It’s been different phases. On the one hand, I definitely had a sort of panic about being forced to isolate and change my routine, as well as the lack of human contact and the inevitable work reset. But on the other hand, it was also pretty wonderful to have time. I was explaining to my team, if we’ve been kind of slow, it’s only because we’ve had the time to prepare everything and look deeper into our needs and what we want. It’s very strange, though; a lot of things have come out of this rethinking.

> **‘It’s a sort of love-hate relationship situation. But it’s not like you’re missing out on anything; it’s more a complete detachment from *everything*.’**

Lotta: I’ve been in a sort of love-hate relationship with the situation. The first couple of weeks I really, *really* enjoyed it. I never imagined this could happen to us, to have this break during which the whole world stops, and you are forced to stop. It’s not like you’re missing out on something; it’s a complete detachment from anything and everything. And I was really enjoying living this newly found, reckless, irresponsible lifestyle, like a teenager, hanging out, chilling, watching movies, catching up with this endless list that had accumulated over the years, rediscovering little hobbies. After a couple of weeks, it started to wear off, and then we heard there was another month of quarantine, and that meant obviously no travelling, no kind of physical freedom whatsoever. Suddenly it starts to get to you. It’s emotionally extreme, in a way. As we don’t even know what’s really going to happen, we can’t really make plans; we don’t know if it’s going to be another two or three months or six. The whole of 2020 has been crossed off the calendar.

Marta: Have you been able to keep any sense of work-related normalcy?
Lotta: My job is about communicating with people and about collaboration; at least, that’s how I look at it. All that has been really put on hold. Now everyone is asking the question of how we’re going to do editorial shoots. Everyone is trying to create solutions, but there’s still a lot of questions. I’ve just signed a new client, so we have started our meetings via Skype and Zoom, and that’s been quite fun. Normally I’m quite video shy, so I really had to overcome this. It’s interesting to start a new experience with someone you’ve never met.
Gaia: Except for the calmer environment, nothing has really changed. I meet online with the studio head and the design team, and it’s almost the same dynamic. I spend half the days with them, then I also need my time to draw. It’s the same process, just done through a screen, but we are having to think out of the box. Do we need as many collections? My principal desire now is to come up with something for next year that will be strong enough to be a hit within these new expectations, which are massive. I’ve literally been asked to rethink our entire proposition because of this situation, environmental expectations and a flooded market.
Marta: And then there are the safety concerns.
Gaia: We don’t want to take risks, so we’re not going to the studio. A few people will go in from next week to use the 3D printers and do mock ups.
Lotta: How are you guys doing the prototypes? Have any of your designers actually been making things at home?
Gaia: We have the 3D pros; one of them can actually sculpt things. We’re still at the drawing part of the process, though. We have more time, because instead of June we’re now delivering for September. We’re producing about 10% of what was planned for the year. We’ve been able to go back to concepts and ideas that stand out, and that’s precious.
Lotta: I function best when I’m in movement; I find calmness within that somehow. I get so many work-related ideas in planes and trains; I’m so used to that. Going out into the world, seeing people and contemplating life is also a very important part of what I do. These days I’m going inside myself, exploring art, books and films for a different kind of inspiration, while everything has been put on hold. That’s not in itself a bad idea. I agree that the fashion industry has been spinning out of control at such speed that no one really knew where they were going and no one knew how to stop it. A positive thing we can take from this strange situation is the time to rethink, to look back on what we’ve been doing and aspects of the industry. Time in general; you need time to develop things. There’s so much overproduction of clothes, and I’m not really sure we need that many or will want to spend that much money on them. We need to rethink the industry and make it more human; give people time and rest.
Gaia: There’s also going to be a chain reaction as a consequence of all this, including an economic recession. Generally, when you’re challenged, when you have fewer means, you’re forced to come up with better. We’re a generation still following what the previous one was doing in terms of patterns, collections, and presentations – and they have even grown in recent years. So we need to ask the question: do we need all these collections, these presentations. Lotta, you work with brands that have been aiming to change the whole system.
Lotta: That’s what I always find quite funny: they try to change it and then they always sort of fall back into the same positions. That’s how it’s been over the last couple of decades. Like, there’s a trend for a different type of casting, more real faces, but then suddenly everyone goes back to supermodels. It’s funny how the industry has to go back to what it’s used to and comfortable with. But now we’ll definitely – hopefully – need to change the way we look at things.

> **‘Image is key right now, whether it’s digital or otherwise, because if we can’t gather together, then we’re going to need to showcase our work somehow.’**

Gaia: Doing that would count as a success. Those that can change should. The generation behind us is so much more prepared than we are, especially the young students fresh out of fashion school. Whenever I do a talk, the only questions I get from them are, ‘Will the industry change? Will it become sustainable?’ We have to listen.

Marta: Will it be possible to return to fashion’s pre-Covid comfort zone now?
We’ll no longer be travelling across the world for a day’s work, for example.
Lotta: That’s not really needed – Zoom works! We really need to look at what’s essential, and reduce certain completely outlandish aspects of it. Essential travel will need to happen, but there’s just so much that has been going on that has been unnecessary.
Marta: How will shoots change, for instance?
Lotta: I haven’t really thought about it until now. I feel like there have been a lot of similar ideas going on, like doing Skype or FaceTime covers. Which is fair enough, because during quarantine it has been the only way to do it. I’m just starting to think about this. I hope we will work more locally, with local talent, and try to think of other ways even if, right now, it’s all a kind of mystery.
Gaia: In our company, we are lucky to have a big space, but if we need to see each other, it will still have to be a maximum three people at a time. Other than that we’ll be rotating or continuing to telework, and we’re not thinking of travelling for work until September. Even if expenses will be drastically cut, people like you, Lotta, need to keep producing imagery, because if we can’t gather together, then we’re going to need to showcase our pieces somehow. So image is key right now, whether it’s digital or otherwise.
Lotta: It needs to remain as strong as possible. It’s one of the only ways of promoting and somehow showing what you do and your product. Right now the methods that we can use to work are very limiting.
Gaia: If only three people can gather at one time, that means mini-productions. Other than that, people have been talking about virtual presentations and showrooms, with everything becoming even more digital. I mean, look at us now; there are ways to do it and image shouldn’t be sacrificed: consumers need to feel that the brand they’re looking has a soul. Objects are not enough.

Marta: Will fashion weeks change significantly as a result of this?
Gaia: I think so. Have you seen that the men’s and haute couture might go digital? Virtual presentations and imagery will be key, or maybe it will be small gatherings, old school one-to-one presentations…
Lotta: But you can’t just switch everything to digital. For now, there’s nothing we can do. I’m sure the fashion weeks in September and October are also going to be cancelled. Brands will have to do digital presentations, but I don’t know even how that’s going to work, just in terms of hiring models. Or will they be some kind of edited video or animation? It’s great that people are trying to find new ways of doing things, though. On the other hand, it will be a shame to miss the real, physical experience and that rush you get when you see a show and it’s all unexpected and exciting. Fashion can be an art form, and you need to have an emotional response, that special feeling. It would be a shame to swap that for a *Fifth Element* world. Again, as we said, fashion – unfortunately or fortunately – always falls back on its old ways, so possibly next year, if there’s no new Covid, fashion weeks might be back.

Gaia: But the recession will be real.

Lotta: Young designers and small brands are going to be hit so hard, and unfortunately a lot of them will go out of business. Luxury brands will lose cash flow for sure, and cut budgets majorly and brutally for future projects, but they'll survive.

Gaia: They're going to have to reinvent themselves regardless. Smaller, family businesses are going to have to rethink their whole strategy or put the key under the door, which is really sad. Even big houses are going to be hit massively and are going to have to react. At the same time that will force change, so hopefully some good ideas will come out of that. Finding new purpose, creating for the Earth, being green. Thinking as a customer, a lot of brands are going to be selling comfortable clothes. Like what you're wearing, Lotta.

> **'Fashion can be an art form, and you need to have an emotional response, that special feeling. It would be a shame to swap that for a *Fifth Element* world.'**

Lotta: As a stylist, I obviously use voguerunway.com, and it's shocking to look at all those brands and hundreds of shows a season and think, what would I actually buy? I mean, I buy a lot of clothes. I'm obsessed.

Gaia: You made the right choice with your Adidas collaboration! [Laughs] Which is what you're wearing right now!

Lotta: I am!

Gaia: We're now looking for comfortable clothes more than elegant ones. Things like, I don't know, cute little pyjamas with a strawberry print. That's what's selling now.

Lotta: I bought two pairs of pyjamas in the past two weeks! [Laughs]

Gaia: It's what we need.

Lotta: But it's just as important to think about what we don't need. There are a lot of brands producing clothes I don't find necessary.

Gaia: Has your closet really been inactive for two months?

Lotta: My closet has been having a very exciting revival-recycling moment. I've been wearing all its street looks while walking my dog. And it's having a good sunglasses moment, too!

Gaia: I have been wearing my yoga gear outside; I don't care.

Marta: Fashion is also about dressing up and gathering, during fashion weeks and at other events. Can the fashion community continue to exist without that real-life contact?

Lotta: I'm quite surprised that there's so much happening on Instagram. At the beginning I wasn't really participating in anything, but now I'm a bit bored, I've started to look for things – and there's so much going on, almost too much! For instance, last night, I was listening to this Nina Kraviz live DJ set from Russia in my bath, then doing an online yoga class, then there was an online dance routine. It's been very entertaining, just in a very different way. Although, yes, personal connection has definitely been missing, and it's a shame.

Gaia: Social media is bringing people closer in this situation, and it's funny because all the links I had – professional links that are also friendly ones after working together for 10 years – have been connecting, sometimes even more, and not just to discuss work directly, more like regularly checking in.

Lotta: I've been FaceTiming with lots of friends from around the world who in normal circumstances I wouldn't have had time to see because I'd be working, travelling or jetlagged.

Gaia: It feels like we're living in the 1960s, but with more technology.

Lotta: Zoom, Skype, FaceTime, WhatsApp… I've been using them all for work to talk to clients. We'll see if that starts changing as regulations progressively loosen. Right now, everyone is talking about promoting things on Instagram stories; that's pretty much the tool.

Gaia: Communication at the moment is key, especially anything that can spark a thought or emotion. But our communications have also been really straightforward; for instance, we have been more descriptive than usual in the e-shop because when stores reopen in Paris, how it will be? Will there be plastic sheets at the tills? Will we accept cash? Will customers be helped by a lady in a mask? Like this *Matrix* shopping experience.

Marta: How do you combine those safety standards with welcoming the client and creating a community?

Gaia: I think it's about sticking to online shopping for now. If you really want to try something on why not, but to me, it feels a bit surreal.

Lotta: I never really used to shop online. Now I'm changing my habits, but I do miss going to the store and trying something on, sometimes being surprised by certain things. I still love the old-school process of going to a place, being received, having the time to discover, touch fabrics. I don't find items well-presented online. It can be frustrating.

Marta: There are a lot of returns with online shopping as well.

Gaia: There are, and we'll have to be a lot more permissive going forward, too. 'Sure, try it on, think about it.' [Laughs] The industry was taken by surprise, and it's not like it's exactly full of tech people.

Lotta: All the younger brands are a lot more efficient, though.

Gaia: Yeah, they were ready.

Marta: Do you think the wider industry will go greener?

Gaia: We don't really have a choice. A lot of people have been talking about it, and we'll definitely need to go with it. We already have a few projects in the company, and they're definitely going to be validated now. We are three generations: the more senior that handles the company; then there's us, and we're super sensitive to it; and then there's the youngest, which is pointing its fingers towards us, asking, 'What are you doing? Why aren't you changing things?' I still have a size of company that allows that kind of questioning. For bigger structures it might be more of a challenge, but the recession will allow the combination. Look around: there's no pollution; there's no need for anything. We're not going to have the means to produce as much or generate as many expenses. Fashion week pollutes as well.

> **'When stores reopen, how will it be? Will there be plastic sheets at the tills? Will we accept cash? Will customers be helped by store staff in masks?'**

Marta: That raises the question of wholesale. Gaia, how do you usually do wholesale and will that change?

Gaia: It depends. Sometimes we just launch a collection through images, sometimes we do one-on-one presentations in our showroom. So that's not going to change much, except there's going to be even less product. I'd like to get creative and express more through fun storytelling with the theme of the collection; maybe invite talents to think freely about interpreting it. Then there's this big discussion: do people need collections or just individual items?

Lotta: I think with jewellery that's part of it; you can do things your own way.

Gaia: Maybe it's more interesting to edit the collections into items.

Marta: What are you looking forward to and not looking forward to the next few months?

Lotta: I think it will be quite scary to see lots of people on the streets all of a sudden. The other day I was walking around the neighbourhood and I saw a bunch of people approaching me, and I honestly started to get really anxious.

Gaia: I'm scared for the people I love, and my teams. We were all quite exposed during the last fashion week, but now with the desire to reopen the economy… I do wonder whether the decisions that are being taken are the right ones. People are already expecting a second wave of infections. We have to be cautious and ready.

Lotta: I just don't think that things will go back to normal. That's the bottom line. The darker the times, the more creative people awaken and react, so I am excited for all the new projects, the new ways we will create and discover. It's an interesting time to be alive, for sure. I've got my small capsule collection with Adidas coming up at the end of June. We've been working on it for about two years, because the cycles of sportswear brands are way longer. It's about 10 pieces.

Gaia: What was the inspiration?

Lotta: I went into the archives and picked out pieces that were relevant to me, like a particular 1960s and 1970s East German-style sportswear. The collection's tracksuit, for example, was inspired by the first tracksuit Adidas ever made. I've approached it more in a styling kind of way, picking what's interesting and then adjusting the fit, making it more modern. I've tried to avoid overdesigning. The clothes are more real and functional. It was a really fun, interesting project.

Gaia: It's very cute; I like the shirt.

Lotta: Thanks! I like the functionality of the details, too, which you don't get in fashion. It was supposed to launch in May, but it got postponed, like everything else. So now we're launching at the end of June. The campaign launch and shoot have also been cancelled, so we're thinking of other ways to promote it.

Gaia: I've working on some cool new pieces, too; not very many, but some really good ideas. We're still at the drawing stage, so it will all come together in 2021. I'm looking forward to it – I just want to wear them!

Matthew Williams and Bella Hadid

‘Social media was all about the media and now it’s all about the social.’

Matthew Williams and Bella Hadid in conversation, 14 April 2020.

Matthew Williams: You’re on the farm right now?

Bella Hadid: Yes, I’m down here on the farm with my animals. Where are you?

Matthew: I’m in Montauk, right at the tip of Long Island.

Bella: At least we both get to be in nature, because it’s definitely calming me down.

Matthew: Yeah, it’s so nice to be able to be outside and do beach walks and to just have some fresh air. But I am going back to the city today for the next couple of weeks, which will be another experience. I’ve just loaded up on groceries for two weeks and I’m going to hibernate in the house with the kids. Have you been riding your horse?

Bella: Yeah, riding every day, but the weather has been so crazy out here. Tornado warnings. Sometimes it will be crazy beautiful, blue skies and everything, and then some days you can’t even leave, like to go see my mum from my house.

Matthew: Have you seen a tornado?

Bella: My house is a little cabin that was built in the 1800s, so the stabilisation is not as good as the other houses, like my sister’s. So when anything happens like crazy rain, the whole house shakes, and I have a lot of windows here so you can hear all the rain and hail and wind. So it feels like I’m in a wind box for six hours while these things happen. But it’s alright. Are you still working?

‘What trips me out is that [before lockdown] it was so normal for us to travel every day. I was sleeping better on planes than I was in my own bed.’

Matthew: Yeah, via Zoom and FaceTime, but it’s starting to slow down because most of Italy is closed. The first cases in Italy were an hour from Milan.

Bella: I remember we were all there that week and I think you stayed in Milan for an extra few days and then came back here.

Matthew: Then we saw each other in New York for a second; I have just been here since. Kind of paused. I am doing a lot of Nike stuff, working remotely on that, and that is pretty much it. What about you? Are you liking the break in travel and the rest?

Bella: It’s been really hard for me because I am such a workaholic – both of us are, I think that’s the common denominator between us, just how much we travel and how much we really enjoy working. When I’m really in it and I’m freaking out, not knowing where my head is, I feel like a chicken with my head chopped off, but I guess that is where I thrive. Over the past few weeks I’ve realized that I love it when people challenge me and pressure me, and in our job that is constant. Here, my mom will be like, ‘Go to the grocery store’, and that is my challenge for the day! I’m, like, ‘Shit, I really do miss working.’ I miss being around people. As a model there are always people around and I took that for granted because I miss people now. But I love being at home. I did really need this, and I think that my body is reacting really well to it. I’m excited to get back to work. I feel super creative and I want to go work with everybody. But definitely for my health and for my emotional stability it’s been good to just *be*. We needed to be able to take time and really think about the people we want to surround ourselves with, and the jobs that we really want to do and the people we want to help. It makes you put things into perspective, like who and what you want to give your energy to. When we go back, I feel like we will want to work with the people that we really want to work with. I guess only time will tell.

Matthew: Totally. I feel like I am going to need some time to get used to being around people again.

Bella: For sure, socially.

Matthew: I feel like it will be a slow ramp into normal life because it just feels so foreign, not being around people like we used to be on shoots or at a show. That whole thing.

Bella: What we know are big sets. We know how to be around a lot of people, and I think that is where it’s going to change, which in some ways will be good for us. I love having big sets; I love for there to be a lot of creative and artistic people on set. But moving forward, from a productive, creative standpoint, it might be nice to have smaller sets with people really connecting one on one with the photographers and the stylists. I think that things will possibly change for the better, eventually, from a creative standpoint, as well. Since you’ve been at home, have you been thinking about more things than usual or is your brain shutting off?

Matthew: It’s been good to have this pause, because I have been looking at things from a new perspective. I have felt rejuvenated creatively, and there wasn’t that much of a pause for the past month. We were still working on things and now it has really slowed, as of last week. It’s so amazing that we have all these tools and we can communicate and push stuff along. But I am really rejuvenated and ready to get back in the studio and start making stuff, putting out work. I hope that with all of the creative industries, like art, music, fashion, there is some kind of response to this downtime that allows for really creative work to happen. That could be a positive thing that could come out of all this.

Bella: I think people are going to come out of this so much more humbled. Just to look at the world and to recognize that this is not happening to just you, it’s happening to all of us. Everybody is getting hit; it doesn’t matter how much money you have or what you look like. And you have to be generous enough to give someone a mask or help a lady in a store – there are just little things you can do. Social media is huge right now and I feel like hopefully that is giving a lot more kids platforms to thrive because everyone is watching right now. For younger musicians, I’m really looking online to find kids putting their stuff online right now, to see if anybody wants to be heard and wants to be seen. This is a great time for people to look out for young artists and young designers. We’re all chilling, doing the same thing, but if we can pull some people along, I think that would be amazing. We all need to help each other out through this.

Matthew: This has really shown how connected the whole world is. I like what you were saying about social media because I feel like social media’s become more social…

‘Putting out stuff on Instagram that is just bragging about how many whatever the hell it is you have – it’s just not about that right now.’

Bella: Which is crazy.

Matthew: There’s real communication happening now, which is amazing.

Bella: I love that people are going on and being able to show their personalities. You know me, I am always super smiley and giggly, but on my Instagram, I am always so not me. But now you are getting to a point where you are like, well, I have shit else to do, I guess I’ll just make a joke.

Matthew: I loved the TikTok that you did when your head got really big; it was so good.

Bella: It was so me, but I would never have done that three months ago. I’m so embarrassed; I can’t believe I put that online.

Matthew: Did you see the ‘Toosie Slide’ that I put up? Same – I would never have done that before.

Bella: I mean when would anyone have seen you or I doing that shit on a regular day? But we all have to bring positivity to other people. To see that video makes me smile and I hope when you saw my video it made you smile. That is literally the cycle of kindness, the cycle of positivity and happiness. Putting out stuff that is just bragging about how many whatever the hell you have – it’s just not about that right now. I love being able to interact like this. Social media was all about the media and now it’s all about the social. About actually interacting with people.

Matthew: I really love your family’s outlook on everything. I was texting with Anwar the other day…

Bella: Oh, I miss him so much.

Matthew: Yes, I love him. I haven’t been able to connect with him enough. He is so cool and has such creative purpose and positivity about making the world a better place. What is it with your family? Everyone has these amazing positive intentions for their existence. I’m really into that.

Bella: That’s really sweet of you. I do feel like that is where we come from as a family – it’s where we ground ourselves. I think that everything that everyone sees is not us as a family, which is kind of weird to say. If you went and saw my sister in her house right now, she has literally been in her pyjamas for three weeks and is cooking up a storm and making chairs out of God knows what. She is so creative. Anwar is digging up crystals and writing mantras and poems and is just an incredible angelic force. My mom is right there on her little truck going to feed the cows. Where she grew up, in Holland, she didn’t grow up the way that we were lucky enough to grow up. We were taught that we have to work hard and be kind and that is pretty much all we can do as growing adults. That, and send out love. The hardest part of all this for me, actually, is not being able to hug people. That is something that brings me joy on a daily basis. Hugging and smiling and making other people feel happy. With the masks, I can’t even smile at people, so I’m trying to figure out a new way to express good intentions.

Matthew: It’s cool to connect with you both in a really honest way. I’m sure it’s hard being apart right now. Anwar was saying that he’s in London. Are you quarantining with any other family members or friends or anything?

Bella: My mum is here, my sister is here and our best friend Lea has been here for a month and a half because she was supposed to come for a wedding in New York that got cancelled, so she stayed. I feel like everybody just stayed wherever they were a few weeks ago. My mom's best friend is here too, actually. But we are all on separate parts of the farm. It's nice to connect and then disconnect and to just be, I guess.

Matthew: It's nice to have people who aren't your family in quarantine, too, because that adds a little bit of normality, in some ways. Like, 'I'm gonna put pants on to have dinner.'

> **'I try not to look at my phone for the first hour when I wake. When you look it just brings so much of other people's energies into your own field.'**

Bella: This is my best friend of 10 years and my Godmother, who was there when I was born, so I'm not putting pants on for anybody! We have two geese, and a big crystal under the tree outside my house – a big amethyst – and the goose laid her egg by the crystal and the big papa goose is sitting next to it, like a lookout. She is sitting on top of her egg next to the crystal and he is sitting there watching like a hawk. It's on the way to my mom's house, so if anyone walks by, he freaks out. You have to walk straight and not look at him. But I think we're friends now.

Matthew: That's going to be a special goose that gets born by a crystal.

Bella: It's going to be so cute, like the holy goose of the farm! We're going to have a ceremony for the birth.

Matthew: That's so cool.

Bella: Do you miss travelling?

Matthew: It's interesting, because, like you said, I've been travelling pretty constantly for the past 10 years and…

Bella: Never stopping. I'm on 5 years and you're on 10 years. I can't imagine how that feels.

Matthew: Maybe even a little bit more. Maybe 15 years. It's like you get used to it, it becomes like a habit. This is the first time I have ever been in one place for six weeks other than when my kids were born and we were waiting for the births. It feels good though. It feels more natural. I would like to travel less if I could. But I think we just don't know what things are going to look like in the future.

Bella: What trips me out is that it was so normal for us to travel every day. I was sleeping better on planes than I was in my own bed, which is, I'm sure, exactly how you feel. But now it feels normal to wake up and have coffee in the same place every day.

Matthew: I prefer this lifestyle; it's healthier. But you know, what was kind of crazy with our group of friends was that we would see each other all over the world, in LA and then New York and then Tokyo, Paris or Milan, and now you don't see your group of friends who work in the same industry as consistently.

Bella: Yeah, it's crazy. That was the best part of what we get to do. I always looked forward to seeing friends during fashion weeks, casting directors and designers and our big friend link-ups every three months or whatever. That kind of shit made me so excited and now we are all so separated. Like, I have been playing Uno with… by the way you have to come into our Uno sessions, I'm going to send you the link.

Matthew: Are you doing digital Uno?

Bella: You don't even know.

Matthew: How do you even do that?

Bella: There's a few things… Also I'm about to be number-one gaming queen online, I'll tell you about it later.

Matthew: You, a gaming queen?!

Bella: I am literally going to start an account where I just play games online, on video. I'm going to be a key girl, what do you think?

Matthew: I like it. [Laughs]

Bella: I have a lot of new endeavours I am looking into, such as gaming. What was I saying…? I love Uno, but I am also really good at Uno, so if you come, you have to be very serious about it. I think we should also be using this time for a lot of other things, other than creative stuff. What are you doing for yourself?

Matthew: I do meditation twice a day. I have been doing that for a few years now and that has been good to have a kind of routine and…

Bella: …ground yourself.

Matthew: Yeah. And I have been doing online yoga which has been nice.

Bella: I'm going to start doing that.

Matthew: I've been trying not to read the news so much. I listened to this talk that Nike did with Deepak Chopra for Nike's design community and he was talking about how sometimes reading the news is an additional stress, and we control whether we add that to our lives or not. So I am trying to balance it. I read the news a few times a week, but it is so easy right now to just sit on your phone and get engulfed in it. I want to try to be as present as possible. And just be OK with what today is and not think about potential versions of the future and how things could end up. For sure, anything that I'm thinking of, it won't actually be like that.

Bella: Like the worst-case scenario?

Matthew: Or even the best-case scenario. It's so easy when you're still not to be in the present and just be thinking about the past or the future. I try not to look at my phone for the first hour when I wake.

Bella: I have always been on that. First hour, you shouldn't look at your phone. That just brings in so much of other people's energies to your own field. I really think that an hour helps. An hour after you wake, just don't even look at it.

Matthew: Yeah, it definitely helps. And just accepting what is happening. What about you, what are you doing that is healthy for you, for your mental or physical health?

Bella: I genuinely like to watch the news. We're in this bubble of safeness and sometimes you forget what's really going on in the world and the planet, not only with Covid-19, but also with poverty and deaths that are not even linked to this. There is still so much going on, so for me to be able to educate myself is the best thing I can do for me. Right now, I am really working on what I can do to help. That has been keeping me super calm. My mom would always tell me these stories about how we would be walking down the street and I would just hug anybody who was sitting there, whether they were homeless or not. I just loved being with people and around people and making people happy. Right now I am trying to see what I can do from here to bring that effect, which is making me feel almost useless, which then makes me want to work even harder. I am a really creative person, but right now that aspect is shut off while I am in quarantine, because I am thinking about people. I tie-dyed this Chrome Hearts shirt last week.

> **'We're in this bubble of safeness and sometimes you forget what's really going on in the world, not only with Covid-19, but also with poverty.'**

Matthew: I love your Chrome Hearts collections; they are my favourite.

Bella: Oh my God, thank you. The thing is, there are so many things that Laurie [Lynn Stark, co-founder of Chrome Hearts] and I have had conversations about, so I think I'm going to start tie-dyeing Chrome Hearts shirts and then auction them off for charity and maybe get some more masks or get more food sent off to people. I've been donating to Feeding America and a bunch of little charities in New York, just to send food out. I don't know exactly what I can do right now to help. I get super emotional thinking about the people who on an everyday basis work their asses off, on the lines and at restaurants and drive-throughs and hospitals. They are still exposing themselves. A lot of the time they have big families and don't have a lot of help, so if we can do anything it is to give back to them and make sure their kids have food on the table. I hate feeling that these kids won't have games to play with or food to eat while their parents are working. I don't want the parents to ever feel they are not doing enough. It's a hard job being a mother or father, and to work like that while your kids are home 24 hours a day. That's crazy. We've never had to deal with this before. There's not really a manual of how to work through this, especially if you don't have the basics. There is a lot of struggle out there and I am just sitting on my bed and wishing I could do more.

Matthew: Well that is one of your best traits, how empathetic you are.

Bella: I think something that we are all going to learn from this is that we can't be selfish. I have been thinking about my friends who are alone in London. At least I have my mom and my sister on this farm, and I am still around human life. People are literally just alone and have been alone for four weeks. We need to check up on those friends and do what we can to help.

Matthew: So what are you going to do for the rest of the day?

Bella: I am going to take pictures of the shirt I tie-dyed. I don't know where to sell it; I don't know how to do an auction space.

Matthew: I did a sale of my archive on Grailed and all the proceeds went to an orphanage I work with in Kenya, in Lamu. Grailed get the money into their account and then they donate it for you.

Bella: Amazing, that is exactly what I am going to do. That's perfect; you're a genius.

Matthew: It's good because they do a timeline and storytelling around the product and the cause that you are donating to, so people are shopping, but they can also learn about the cause you want to contribute to.

Bella: I love that. I think that everybody should be going through their archives, seeing what stuff brought them joy at one point, if it could now bring joy to someone else, and if they might be able to help our world right now. Just don't think about yourself today! We're going to be able to get through this together. Right?

Matthew: Well, I love you so much. Bye, Bella.

Bella: I love you, too. Bye. See you soon.

Juergen Teller and Dovile Drizyte

Moderated by Thomas Lenthal and Jonathan Wingfield

‘Everyone was just happy to talk, and free to show us into their lives.’

Juergen Teller and Dovile Drizyte in conversation, 21 May 2020. Moderated by Thomas Lenthal and Jonathan Wingfield.

Juergen Teller: Good morning.
Jonathan Wingfield: How’s your back, Juergen? Is it still hurting?
Juergen: A little better, I had acupuncture yesterday. I am pretty sure it’s from shooting all these portraits for *System*.
Jonathan: Does that mean you’re going to sue us?
Dovile Drizyte: [Laughs] That’s exactly what I was about to say; we should call our lawyer!
Juergen: There’s a bad pain all around my shoulder. Because when I’m shooting someone as they appear through the iPad screen I’m crouching down the whole time, looking into the screen, trying to figure out what the light is like in their house, working out how to shoot from our side, in the studio, and if we need props, and leaning down to shoot. And while Dovile engages the person by talking to them, I’m always in this weird crouching position holding the camera. It’s not like shooting normally. But she has massaged it all around the shoulder and it’s feeling better.

> **‘Everyone was positive or reflective, displaying different emotions – shooting these pictures has turned out to be a psychological experiment.’**

Jonathan: You mentioned the other day that you were enjoying the routine of getting up early each morning and going to the studio. Is routine important to you in general?
Juergen: Very important. It’s good to have some kind of routine and structure in your life. For me, it started when I had my first child, Lola; you automatically adopt a routine, whether you want it or not. Before that, you sleep until 11 in the morning and things don’t matter.
Dovile: I’d call it discipline. We wanted to maintain some kind of discipline in these times of isolation, and not just say, ‘Alright, let’s pretend this is a long holiday.’ So this routine-slash-discipline helped us to keep the creative thing going, to achieve a lot of fun things, and take up projects like this one you guys gave us.
Jonathan: The project is anchored in the format of shooting each person on a Zoom video call on your iPad, but it’s surprising how varied the results look.
Juergen: I was nervous about how I would achieve different kinds of pictures for each person, because technically I am not very equipped. That was the biggest problem. We’ve been totally self-isolating the whole time, and the only conversations we’ve had have been with our parents via FaceTime or the kids. We haven’t really been communicating with many people, and then suddenly we were facing all these creative people… how many people did we do?
Dovile: I think it was 37.
Juergen: Suddenly you’re talking to so many different people every day, which was super fantastic, but also intense and psychologically draining, as much as physically taking the pictures themselves. Up until then, it had just been Dovile and me talking.
Dovile: We said, ‘Let’s do this, because we’ll have a chance to see people in all these different places and in different moods.’ Everyone was really positive or reflective, displaying different emotions, so it has turned out to be a psychological experiment.
Juergen: It’s interesting for me because most of the time when I photograph celebrities they’ll have their press officer there with them, their ‘people’. Over the past 20 years, it’s become so normal for agents or press officers to say, ‘You can’t photograph there’ or ‘Can I have a look at what you’re shooting on your screen?’ Suddenly, because everyone is isolated, we were free of all that, which was refreshing. Everyone was just happy to talk, and free to show us into their lives, via Zoom: ‘Here is my garden, here is where I play golf, here is my living room.’ And then Dovile came up with the idea that we could build things around the screen, on our side.
Dovile: Like a mise-en-scène. Depending on who was on screen, and then the light and colour of the room where they were, we would place something around the screen to add an extra layer. Some of those pictures came out like still lifes.
Thomas Lenthal: I was particularly interested in this notion of there being two sides to what you do: on one side, you stage things and create your reality, and then on the other side you embrace reality as it happens in front of you, and you react to it, which is usually incredibly personal, even almost child-like. I don’t know any other photographer who would adopt these two ways of going about reality.
Dovile: Something happened recently that made me think about this exact thing. I decided to film Juergen once in a while using an old-school camcorder, just to have a bit of footage. But then he said, ‘Why are you doing it on that old thing? You have your iPhone.’ It made me think that Juergen is one of the only ones who remains truly ‘current’, not necessarily ‘modern’, but he is very in tune with things that are happening right now around him. I think he accepted this idea of ‘staging’, of the mise-en-scène, very quickly because it’s a way to adapt to this current situation and make the people who appeared on the iPad screen seem enhanced by whatever is around them.

> **‘It was important the portraits felt new, not some 1960s-looking, Irving Penn-like, black-and-white, airbrushed pictures with a fake Hasselblad border.’**

Juergen: There were different ways to react to the people and how they presented themselves. For example, the Scottish fashion designer, Charles Jeffrey, just came prepared with this wonderful make-up; it was incredible. He didn’t need anything adding from our side of the screen. After that, I was standing in front of the black screen, waiting for Jerry Stafford to appear, thinking to myself, ‘How on earth am I going to photograph him?’ And then he suddenly appeared on screen and he had already figured it all out! Sitting in his black underwear, on the chair, like Christine Keeler.[1] It was fantastic, totally genius! It was all going well. And then Silvia Fendi appeared, sitting in an office, where the light wasn’t good. So I needed to react super quickly, adapt to all these different situations. That’s why I am always adding something from my current life into it, and that’s where all these fruit and vegetables come from.
Dovile: We’d been shopping, our weekly routine.
Juergen: Before lockdown, we would just go out to eat in a restaurant, then go to Paris to work or whatever, so the fridge is always empty. But now we are working a lot in the studio doing still lifes, and I have all this asparagus and these blood oranges...
Dovile: Nice vegetables and fruit, very photogenic.
Juergen: The fridge is always full. This is my life right now. So that comes into the pictures. I was looking at the colours of the fruit and vegetables and thinking, ‘This is like Missoni colours, and the structure of the fruit is almost like Missoni knitwear.’ So that’s the thing for making a lovely picture of Angela Missoni. And Silvia Fendi was in Rome, so I was thinking, blood oranges come from Italy and I have some, somehow that looks pretty, that’s the photo. You have to be sensitive to each person, and hopefully everybody sees these pictures with a smile on their face, especially at a time like this when everybody’s still in isolation.
Thomas: Your whole body of work is like a personal visual diary of your life.
Juergen: Yes. I recently did an exhibition with Araki and he asked me to go back to my mother’s house and take all the memorabilia. Stuff like these wooden bridges for cellos – making those was my family’s business – and then I found this wooden elephant that my dad had carved, and a little Smurf toy from when I was a child. So I brought all these things back to the studio. But with all that stuff, plus all the fruit and vegetables we had, it was becoming a real mess; all these things lying around. Then we thought somehow some of these things could be incorporated. So, Tim Blanks was wearing this brilliant orange Hawaiian shirt – you know, he always has these ridiculous shirts which no one else would get away with – and Dovile got the papaya.
Dovile: The papaya was just waiting for Tim!
Juergen: And then of course, Rick Owens. I have been to his place in Paris, and it is all concrete and black marble, and all very… Rick Owens! I also have a concrete studio building, and a roman plinth, which is actually an ashtray, so I placed Rick on top of that and it’s a lovely fit for him. Then Gwendoline the actress is more playful and theatrical. Then I heard that Tommy Hilfiger was in Mustique, so we quickly printed out some sunsets to use as a backdrop for him and his palm trees. And, of course, you Thomas. Your name Lenthal sounds like lentil, so we opened a bag of lentils onto the screen when you called. I mean, it’s not like I’d have normally gone to Thomas’s house with a bag of fucking lentils hoping to take a portrait. That would have been totally stupid. But I felt like I was able to play in these pictures and I think that is really important. I have to say, it was incredibly exhausting and a lot of fun. I enjoyed it and I wanted to thank you very, very much for giving me this adventure, which I have never done before.
Dovile: We would like to also thank all of the participants because I think for some very public people it takes real courage to accept this, because they don’t know what is in front of them, they didn’t see what we were building around them.
Jonathan: I have a question. Each of your subjects appeared on your iPad screen, and you then photographed this screen using an iPhone. And although

these pictures are initially destined to be published in our print magazine, we all know that a lot of this work will ultimately be seen and shared by people seeing it on their phones, via Instagram or whatever. So I was curious to know, to what extent do you care if your work looks good on a phone screen, or does that not cross your mind?

Juergen: That is an interesting thing to consider, but I only think about whether the work is good or not. I mean, I don't look at Instagram any more. I used to, and I have to say that I got a bit obsessed by it…

Dovile: Juergen got totally addicted to Instagram.

Juergen: It was so depressing looking at that stuff, so I stopped. The only good thing I got out of it – before the lockdown and while football was still happening – was that I heard about the football transfers earlier than the newspapers. That was the only positive thing I could get out of Instagram! Sometimes Dovile shows me something on Instagram and I look at it and think, 'Oh my God, this image looks quite interesting.' But then I see that same image in a magazine and it is an utter fucking failure and disappointing. When it gets published, it falls flat. That little screen helps make everything look interesting; it makes everything feel OK.

Thomas: I have a question in relation to what Dovile was saying about Juergen embracing the reality of now. It's about the amount of images you currently produce, and have for a while now. It sort of echoes the huge amount of imagery currently being produced around the world, literally billions and billions of images. Juergen, I remember you saying in an interview more than 20 years ago that photographers should only put out 5 or 10 pictures a year. Then, little by little, you have come to terms with this notion that the now is about 'too much'. You have embraced this and decided to do something with the 'too much' instead of going against it.

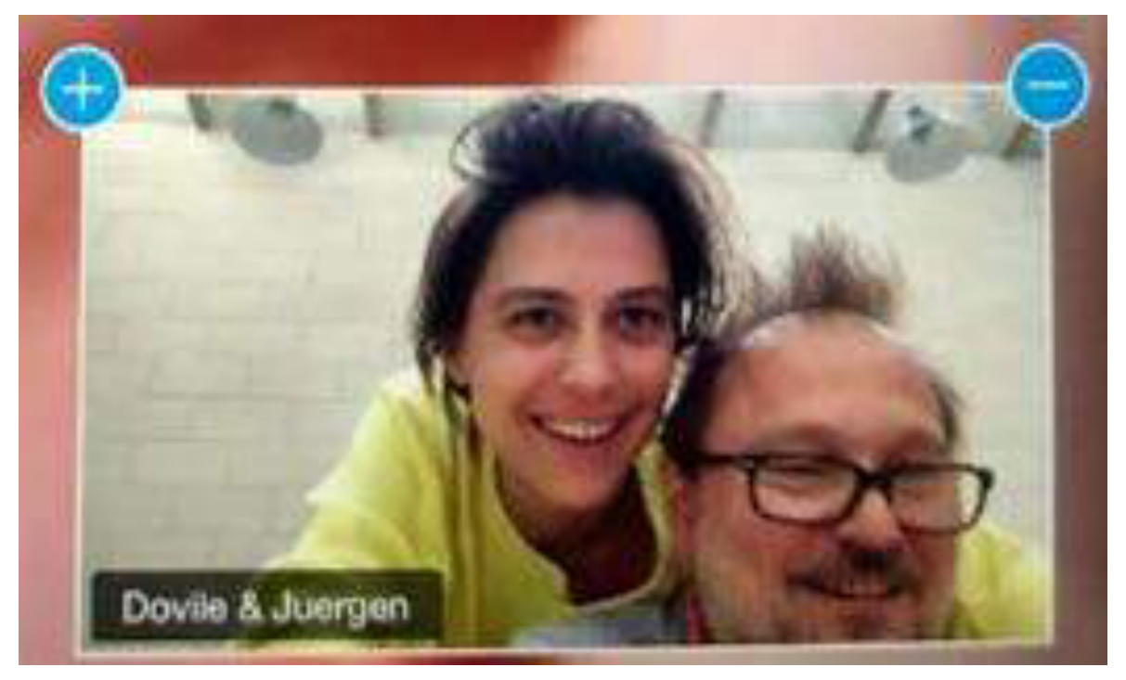
Juergen: Yeah, and this lockdown freed me up to do a whole series of still lifes and pictures of Dovile and other things, and I just stopped thinking or caring what anyone else would think. It was an intense feeling of happiness: playful pictures, not even having to leave the house to do them. It was partly to do with the iPhone, because you can just take pictures and pictures and pictures. In the old days, you had to take a camera and put a film in and develop it and it all cost money. Now you can edit it and work on it and really enjoy this act of photographing.

Dovile: I saw Juergen being totally absorbed by creativity. He became this carefree artist who just did things that gave him pleasure, and he got these fantastic pictures.

Juergen: For me, it was important to do something new as a portrait and not some 1960s-looking, Irving Penn-like, black-and-white, airbrushed picture with a fake Hasselblad border in order to please the subject's vanity and subsequently make money. If I had been between a Saint Laurent shoot, caring about how to shoot the handbags, and then another shoot the following week, I would have approached these pictures in a different way, not in that free manner, for sure. It's been so quiet, just us, how it should be, thinking about funny things and then stopping for lunch, chopping vegetables and eating well.

Thomas: Some people are acknowledging that this confinement situation has been a very positive experience, almost like they were learning to live again.

Juergen: I even have to say that at the beginning of lockdown, for four or five weeks, we hardly drank alcohol at all. We were so healthy – but then we got a bit bored!



Post-production: Catalin Plesa at Quickfix Retouch

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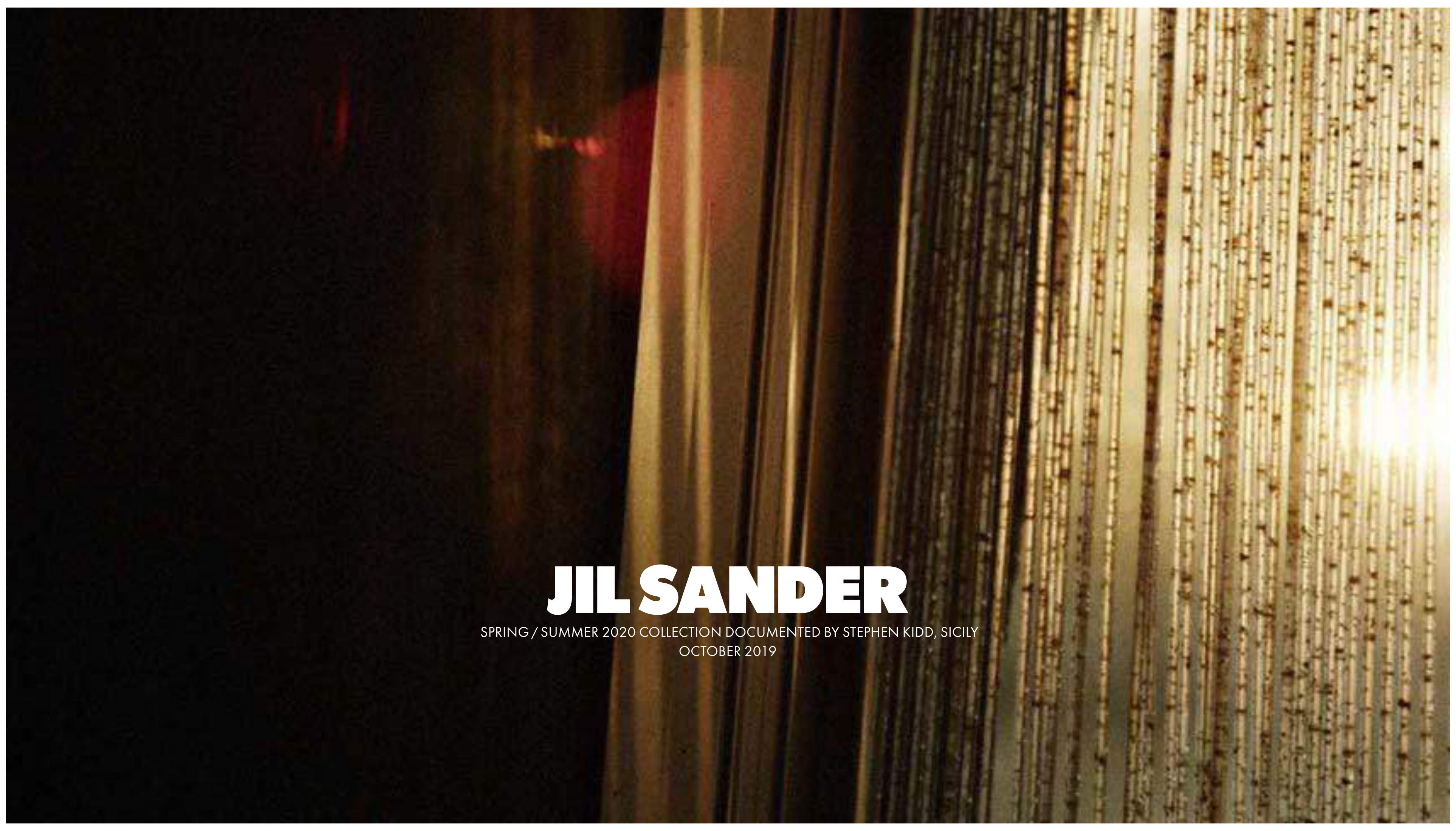
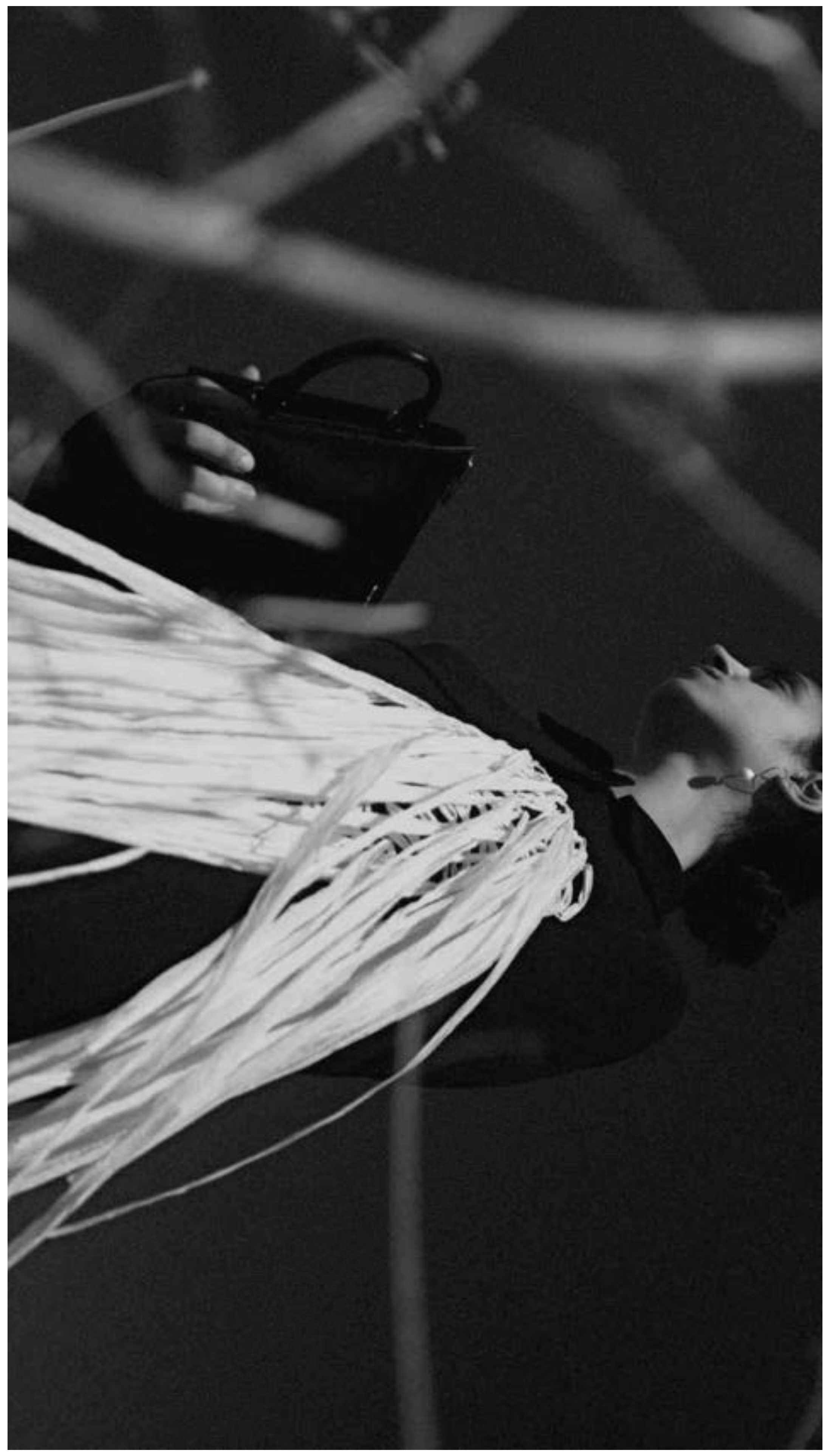
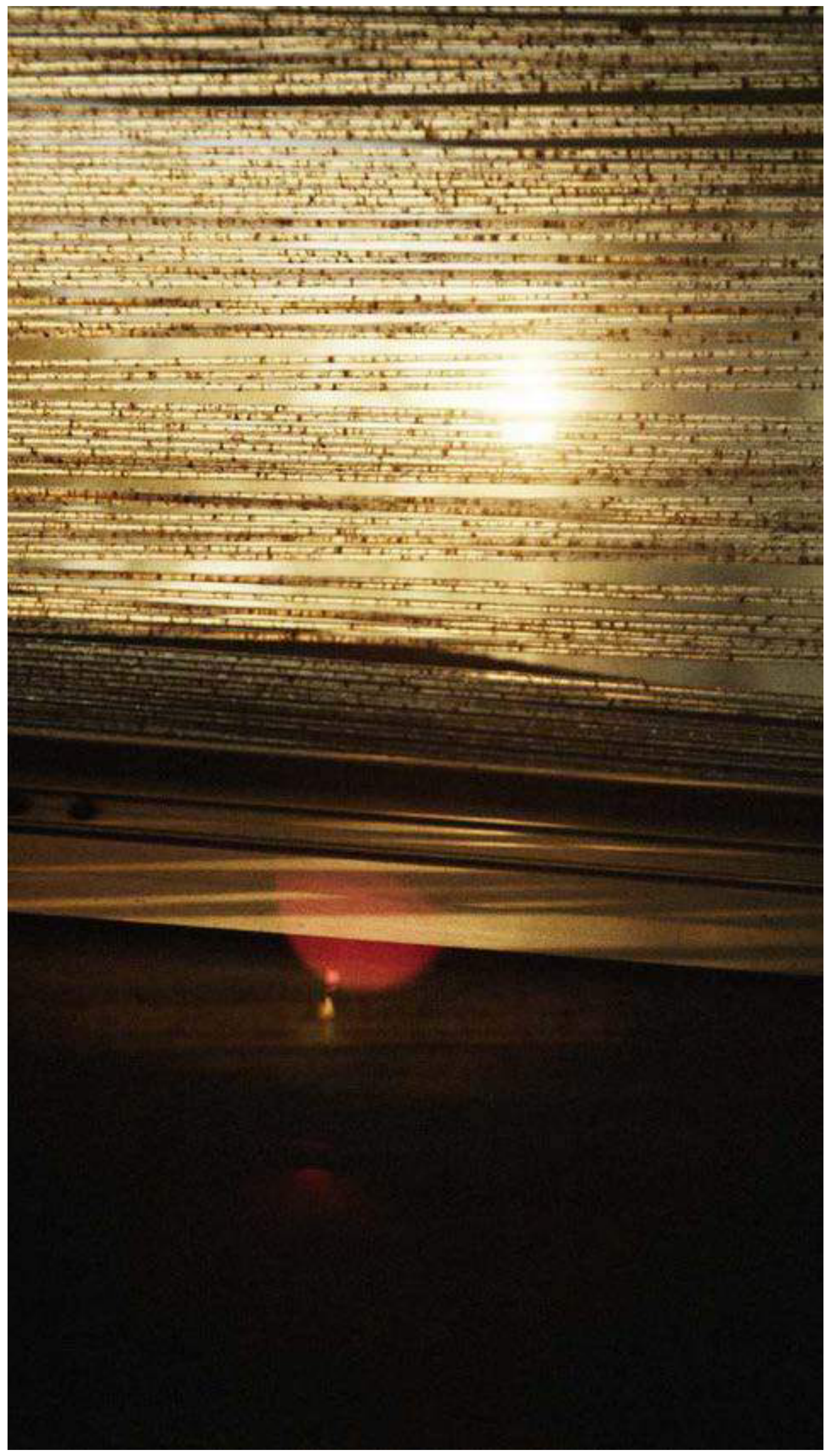
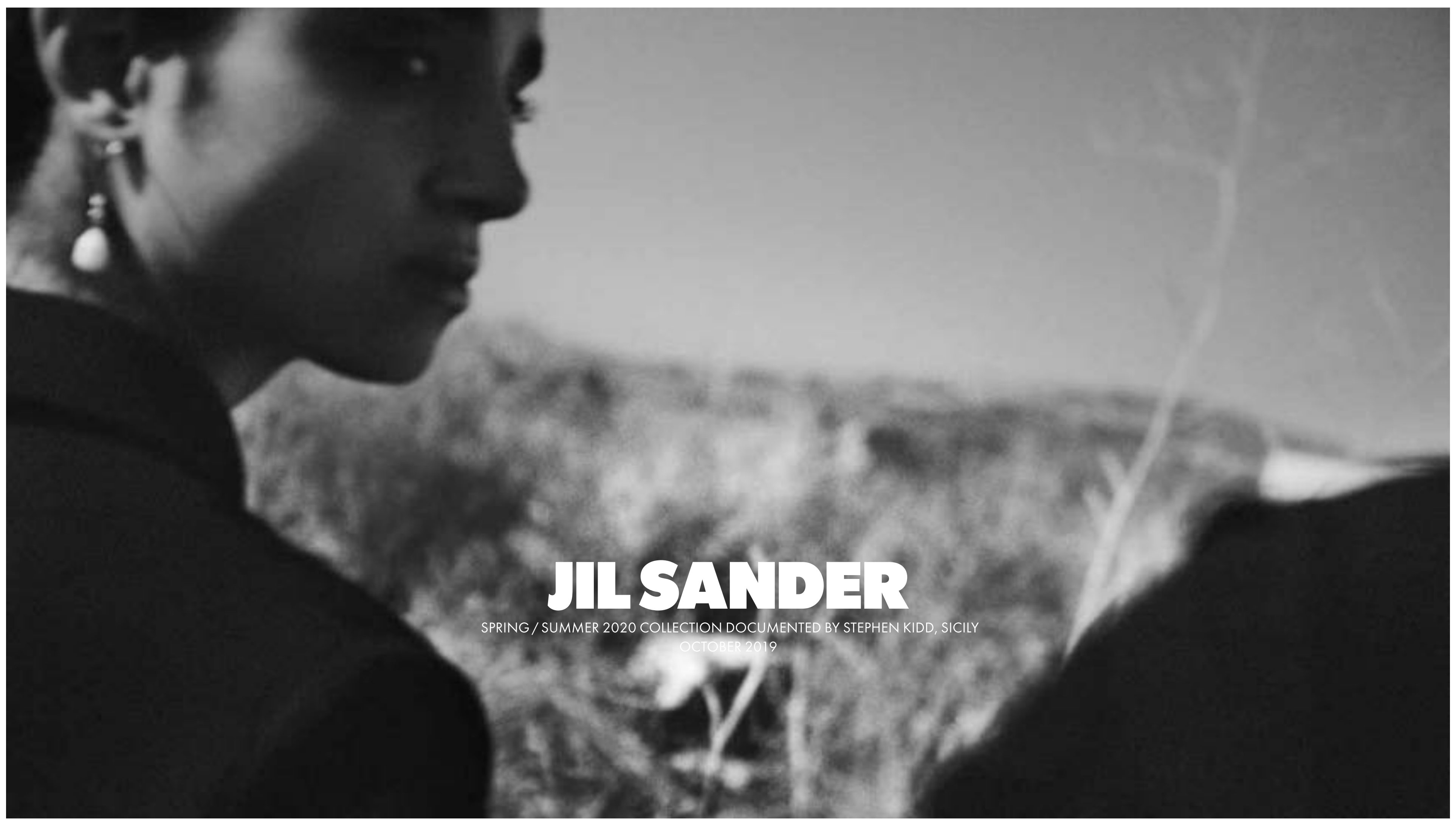
1. Christine Keeler was a British model and showgirl who in 1961 began short affairs with the British Secretary of State for War, John Profumo, and a Soviet naval attaché, Yevgeny Ivanov. When the two relationships became public in 1963, Profumo resigned as a minister and member of parliament and shortly afterwards, Keeler sat for photographer Lewis Morley. The resulting image showed Keeler, seemingly naked astride a copy of an Arne Jacbosen Model 3107 chair, and became instantly iconic. Keeler, who was found guilty of perjury in relation to the scandal and sentenced to nine months in prison, died in 2017. The chair she sat on was donated to the Victoria & Albert Museum by Morley in 2013.


JIL SANDER
SPRING / SUMMER 2020 COLLECTION DOCUMENTED BY STEPHEN KIDD, SICILY
OCTOBER 2019



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SPRING / SUMMER 2020 COLLECTION DOCUMENTED BY STEPHEN KIDD, SICILY
OCTOBER 2019

‘What are we looking at?’

Interviews by Thomas Lenthal

In early April, we sent the following request to 17 leading art directors working in the fashion industry.

We’d love for you to conceptualize and deliver a fashion portfolio with your available means and from your current location. You would be entirely free to work with any partners, and to select any brand(s) you would like to feature in the portfolio. The exercise is one that innately addresses the current restrictions on collaborative work.

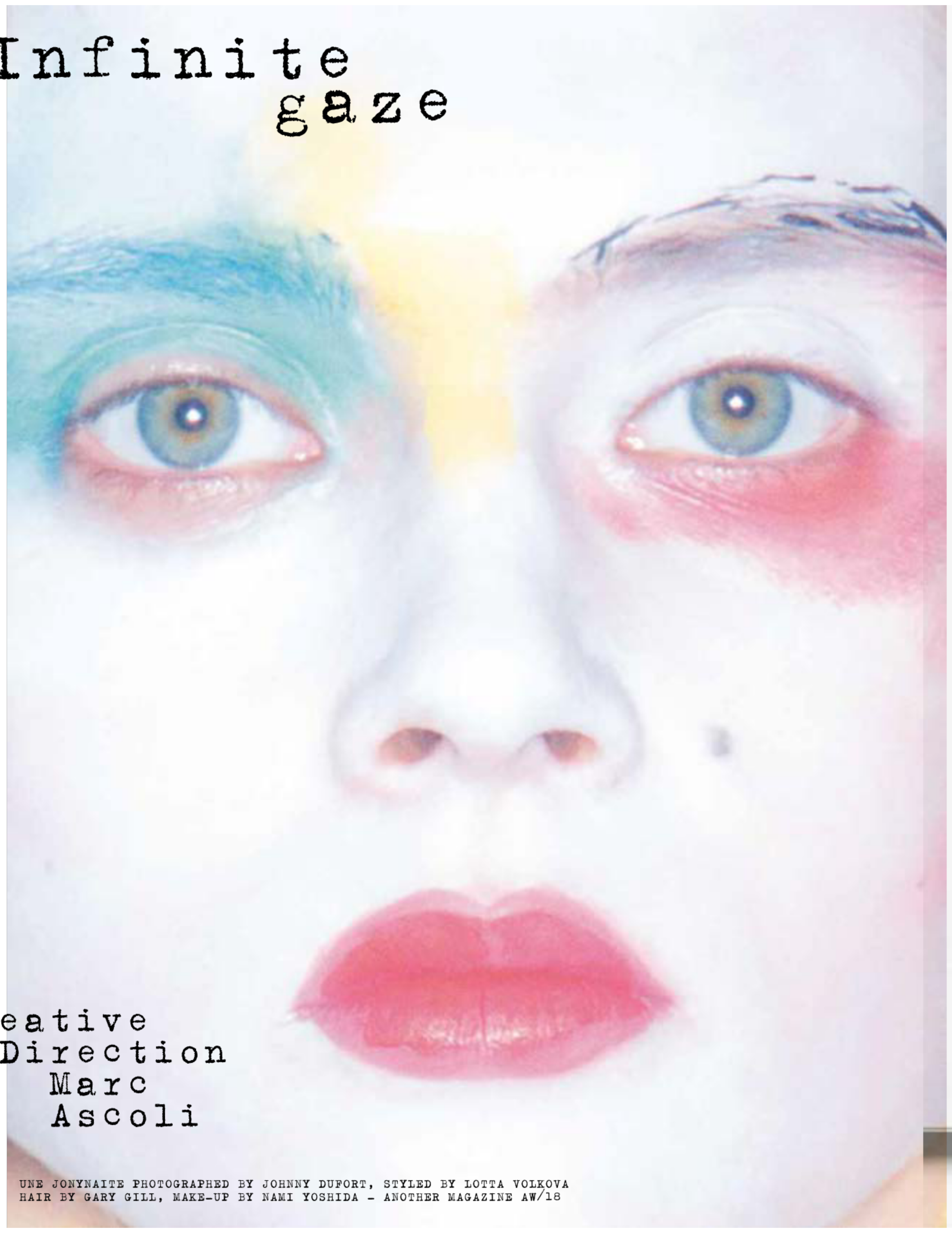
Just prior to sending out that message, we had asked ourselves a question that remains as bewildering today as it was when fashion’s capitals were first entering lockdown: in a world of Covid-19 restrictions, how can you create fashion imagery that often requires in-person collaboration, international travel, shipping clothes, and an often significant budget?

We decided to let the industry’s art directors work that question out for us. In doing so, commissioning a collective body of work that feels both adapted to this uniquely curious moment and which acts as a mirror to its creators. Each of the portfolios presented over the following pages reveals the personality, idiosyncrasies, background, working processes, address book, and creative impulses of the participating art director(s).

We would like to extend our gratitude to each of the participants.

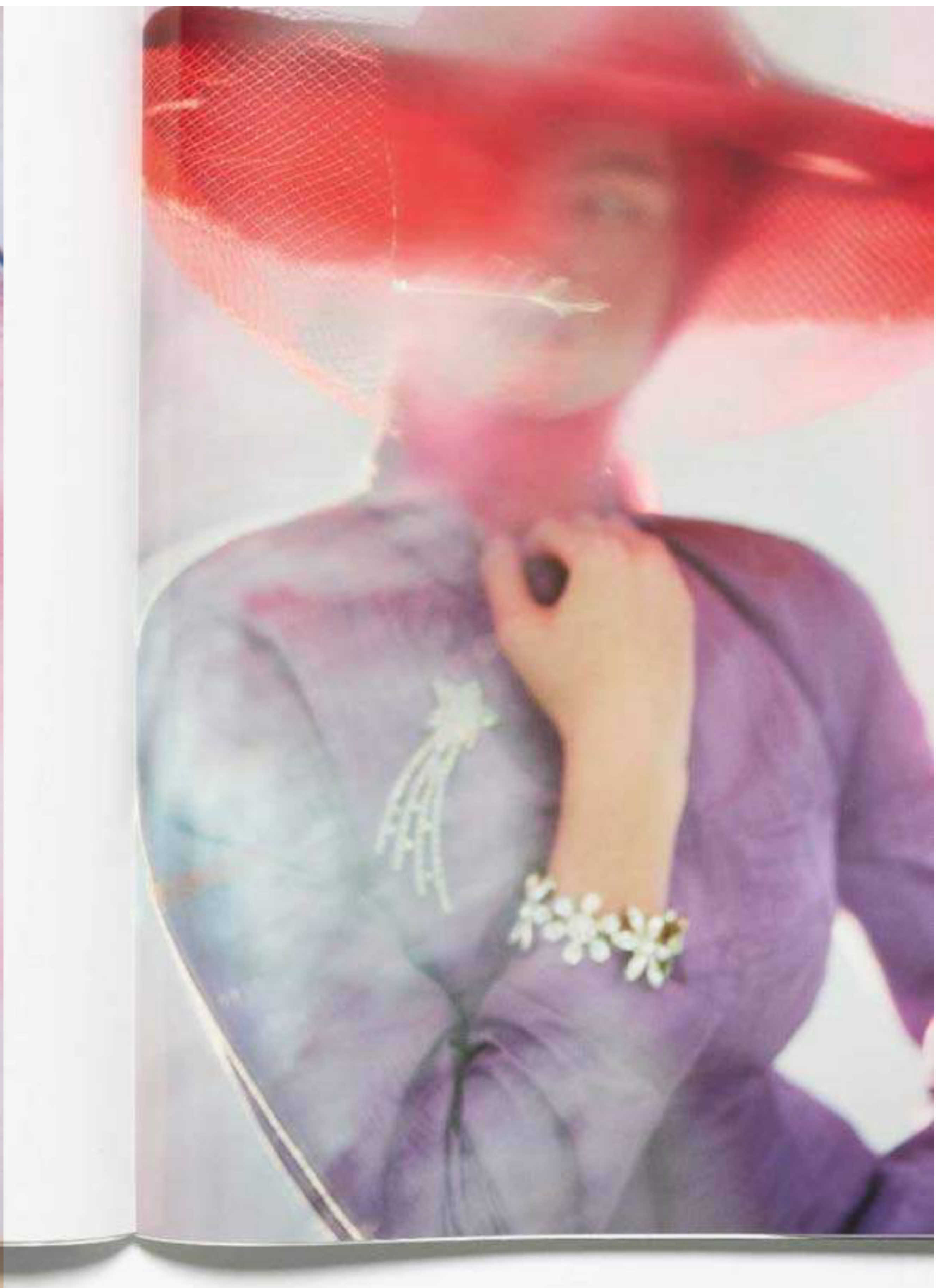
Marc Ascoli
Fabien Baron
Giovanni Bianco
Veronica Ditting
Franck Durand
Dennis Freedman
David James
Ben Kelway
Patrick Li
LJBTN
M/M (Paris)
OK-RM
Ezra Petronio
Jamie Reid
Christopher Simmonds
Lee Swillingham
Ferdinando Verderi

–Infinite gaze

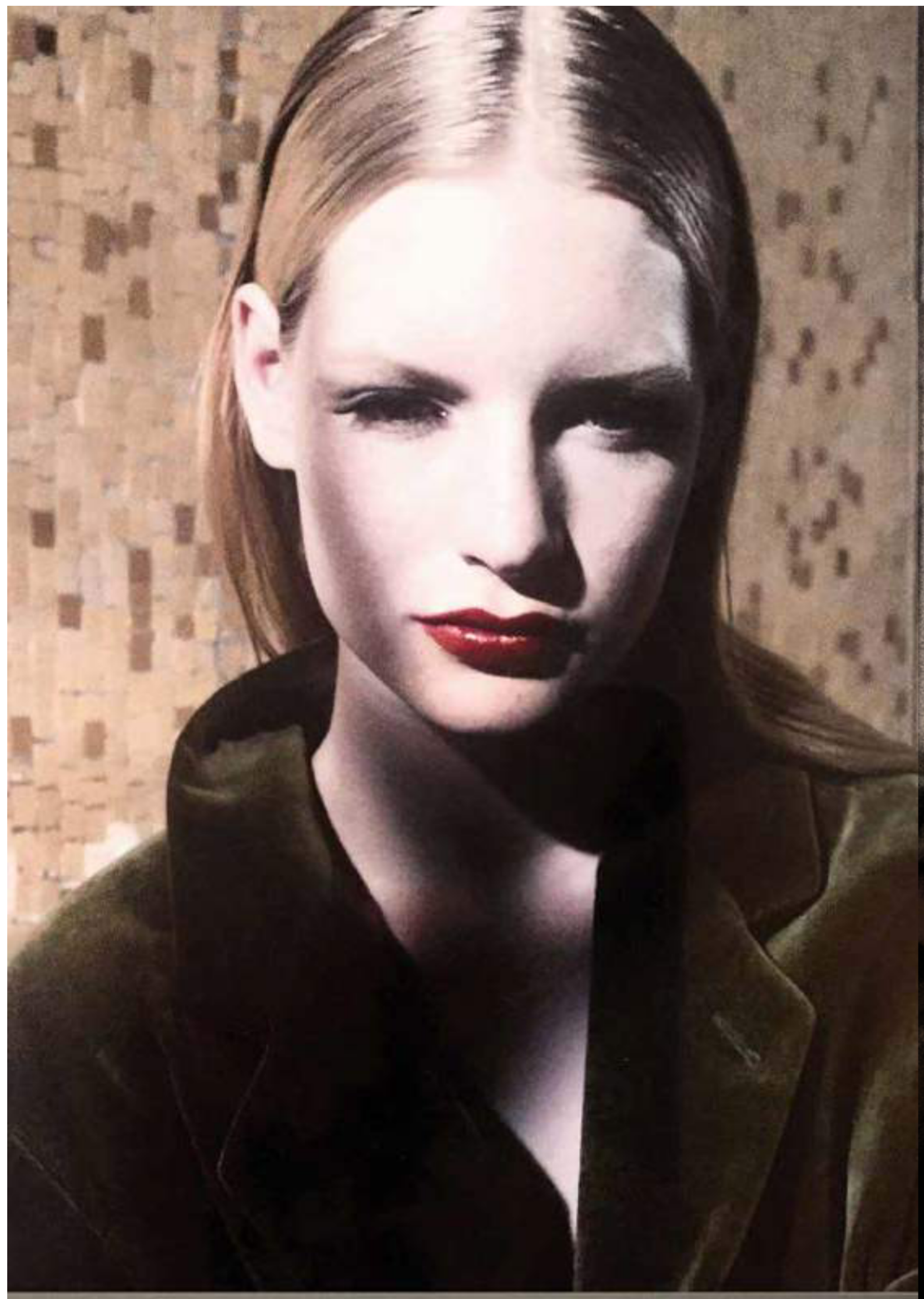


Creative
Direction
Marc
Ascoli

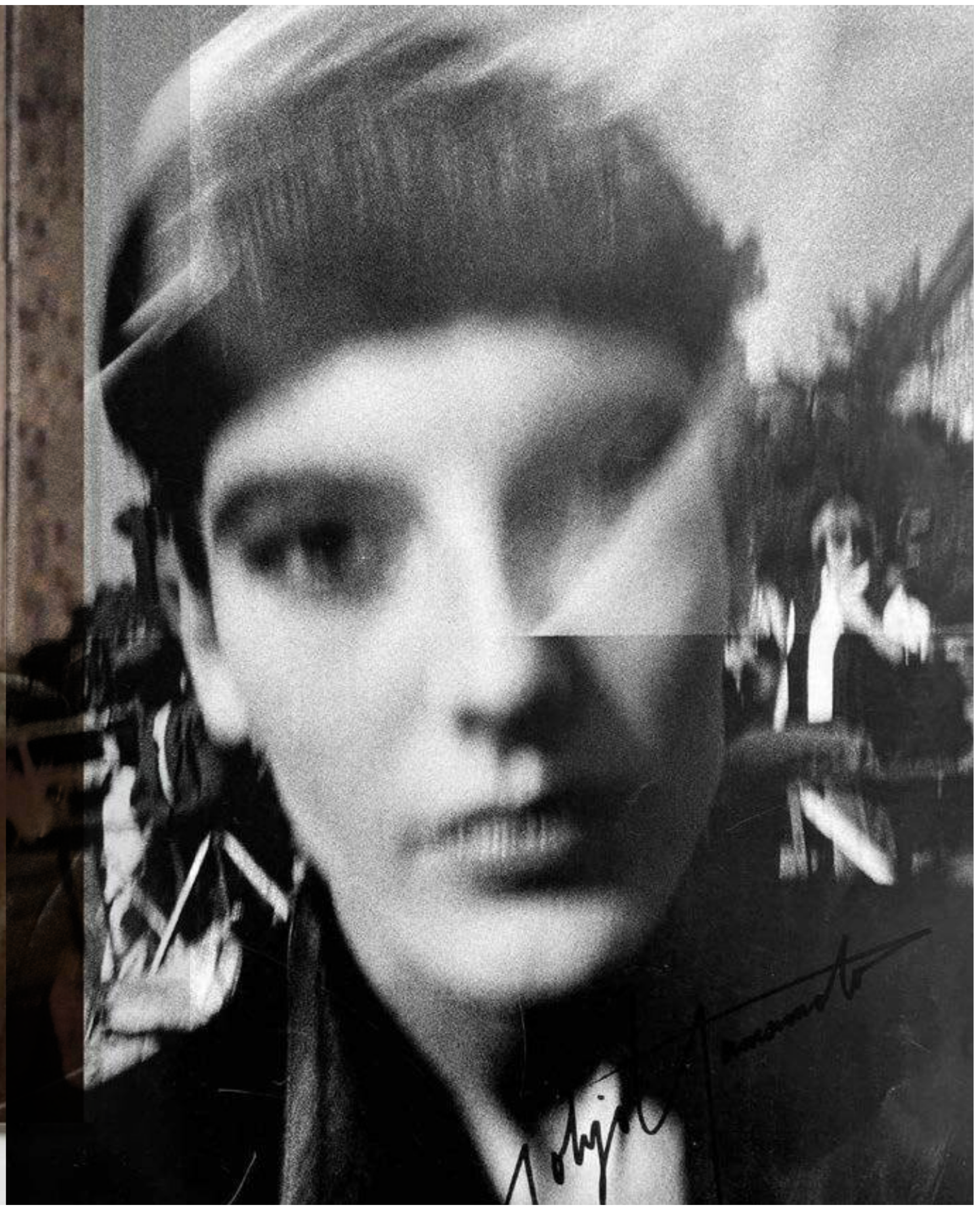
UNE JONYNAITE PHOTOGRAPHED BY JOHNNY DUFORT, STYLED BY LOTTA VOLKOVA
HAIR BY GARY GILL, MAKE-UP BY NAMI YOSHIDA – ANOTHER MAGAZINE AW/18



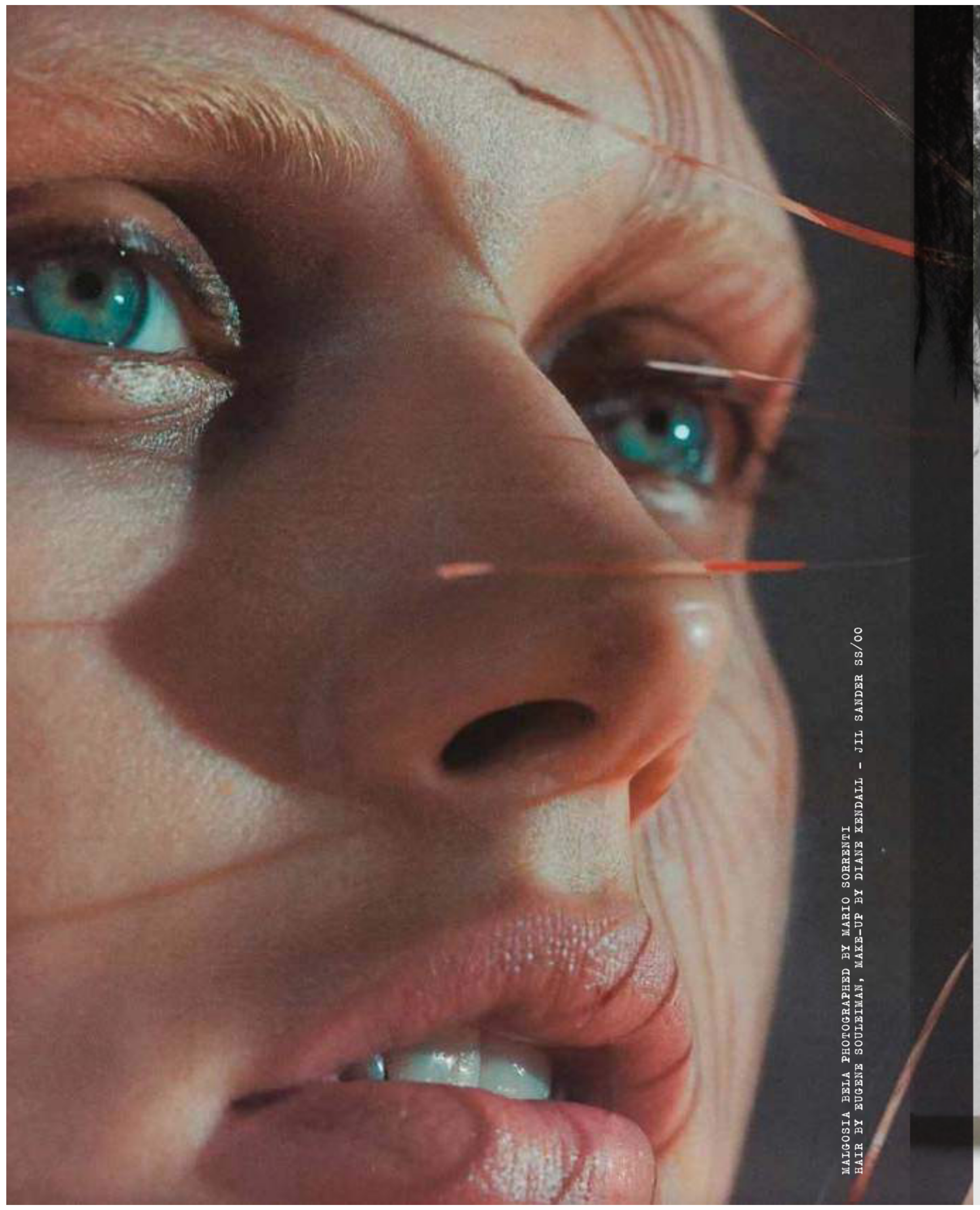
FELICE NOORDHOFF PHOTOGRAPHED BY NICK KNIGHT, STYLED BY KATIE SHILLINGFORD
HAIR BY SAM MCKNIGHT, MAKE-UP BY VAL GARLAND – ANOTHER MAGAZINE AW/18



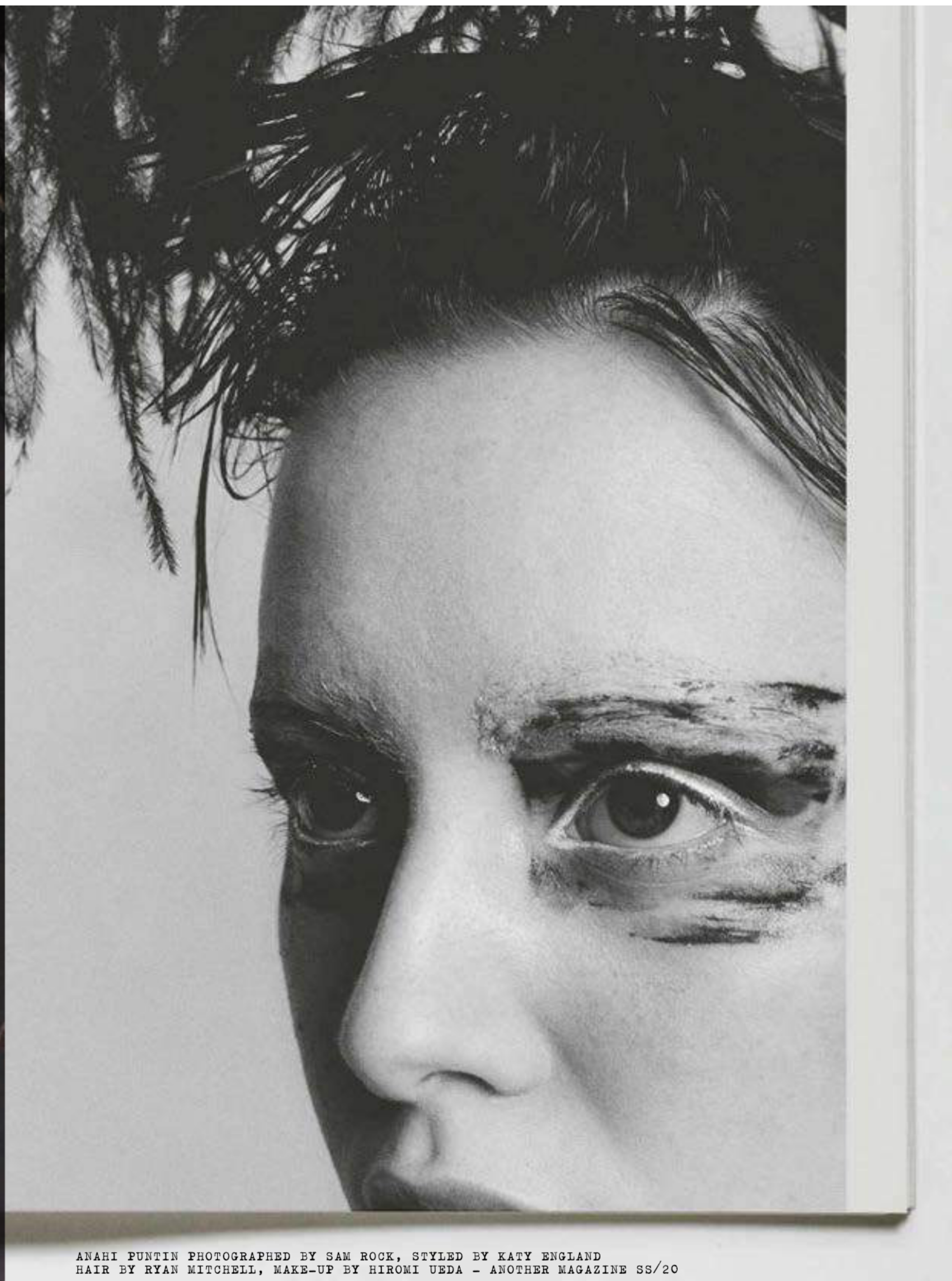
KIRSTEN OWEN PHOTOGRAPHED BY JEAN-FRANCOIS LEPAGE
HAIR BY YANNICK D'IS, MAKE-UP BY LINDA CANTELLO – JIL SANDER FW/90 (UNPUBLISHED)



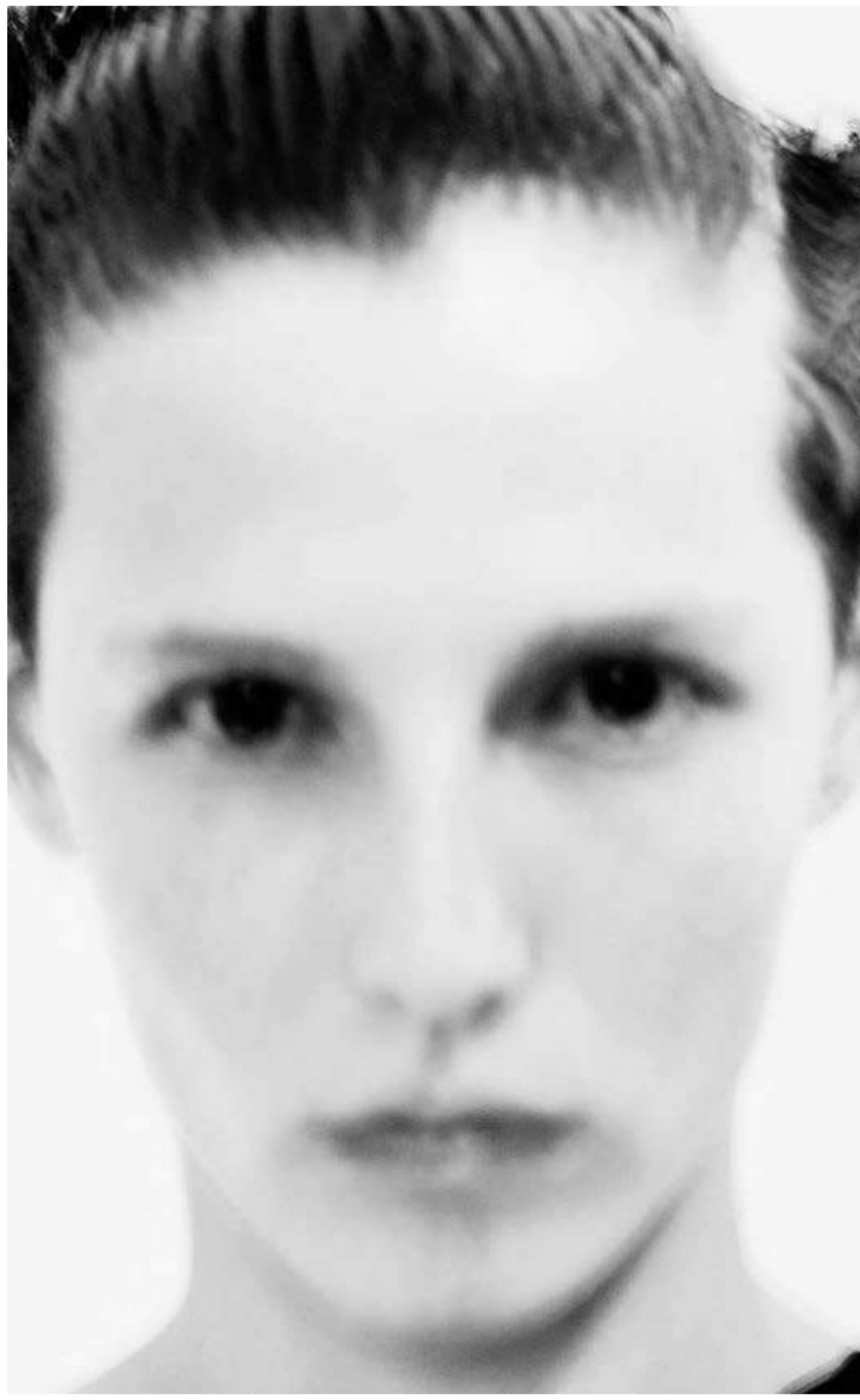
ARIELLE BURGELIN PHOTOGRAPHED BY MAX VADUKUL
HAIR BY YANNICK D'IS, MAKE-UP BY LINDA MASON – YOHJI YAMAMOTO SS/85



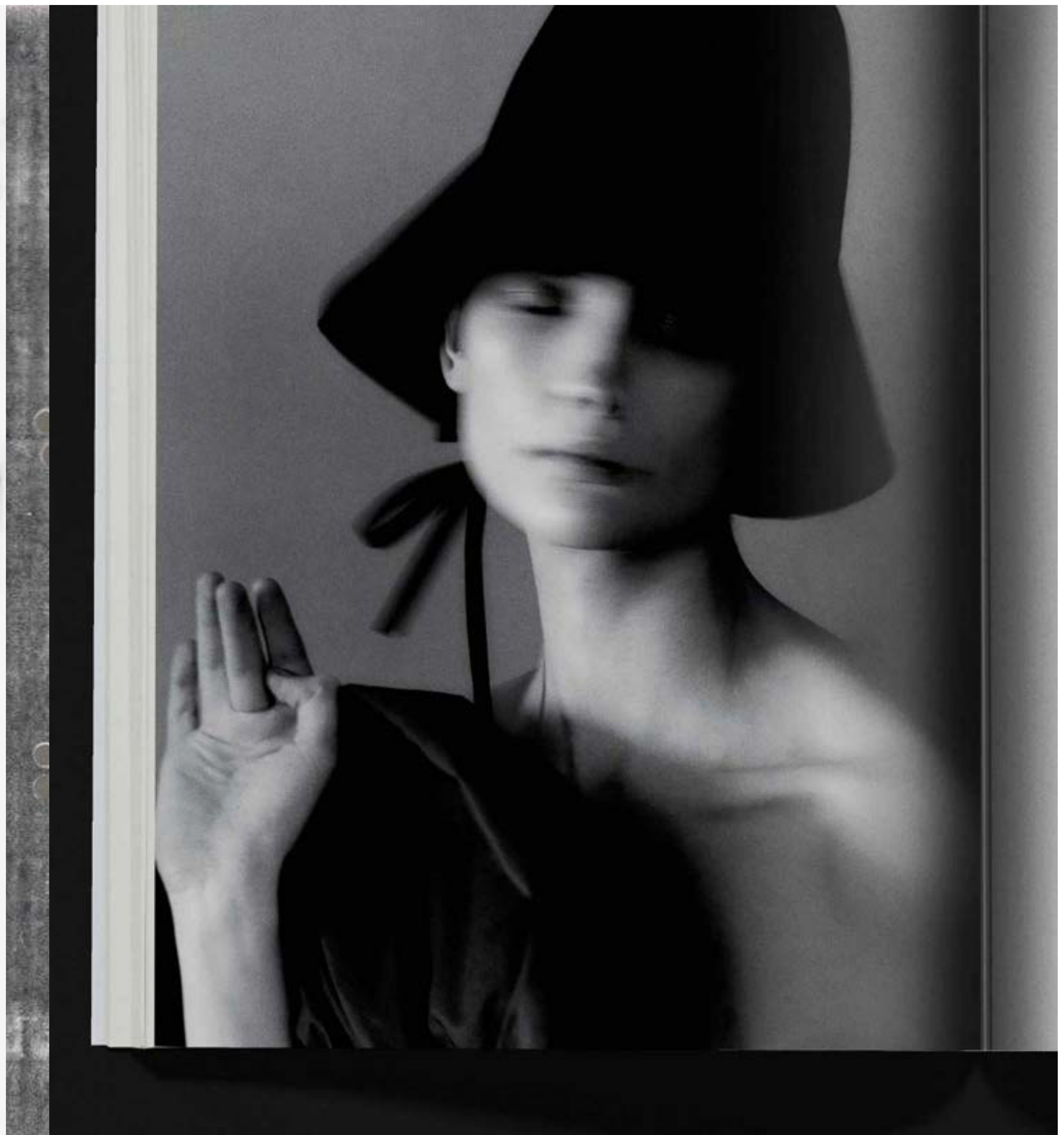
MALGOSIA BELA PHOTOGRAPHED BY MARIO SORRENTI
HAIR BY EUGENE SOULEIMAN, MAKE-UP BY DIANE KENDALL – JIL SANDER SS/00



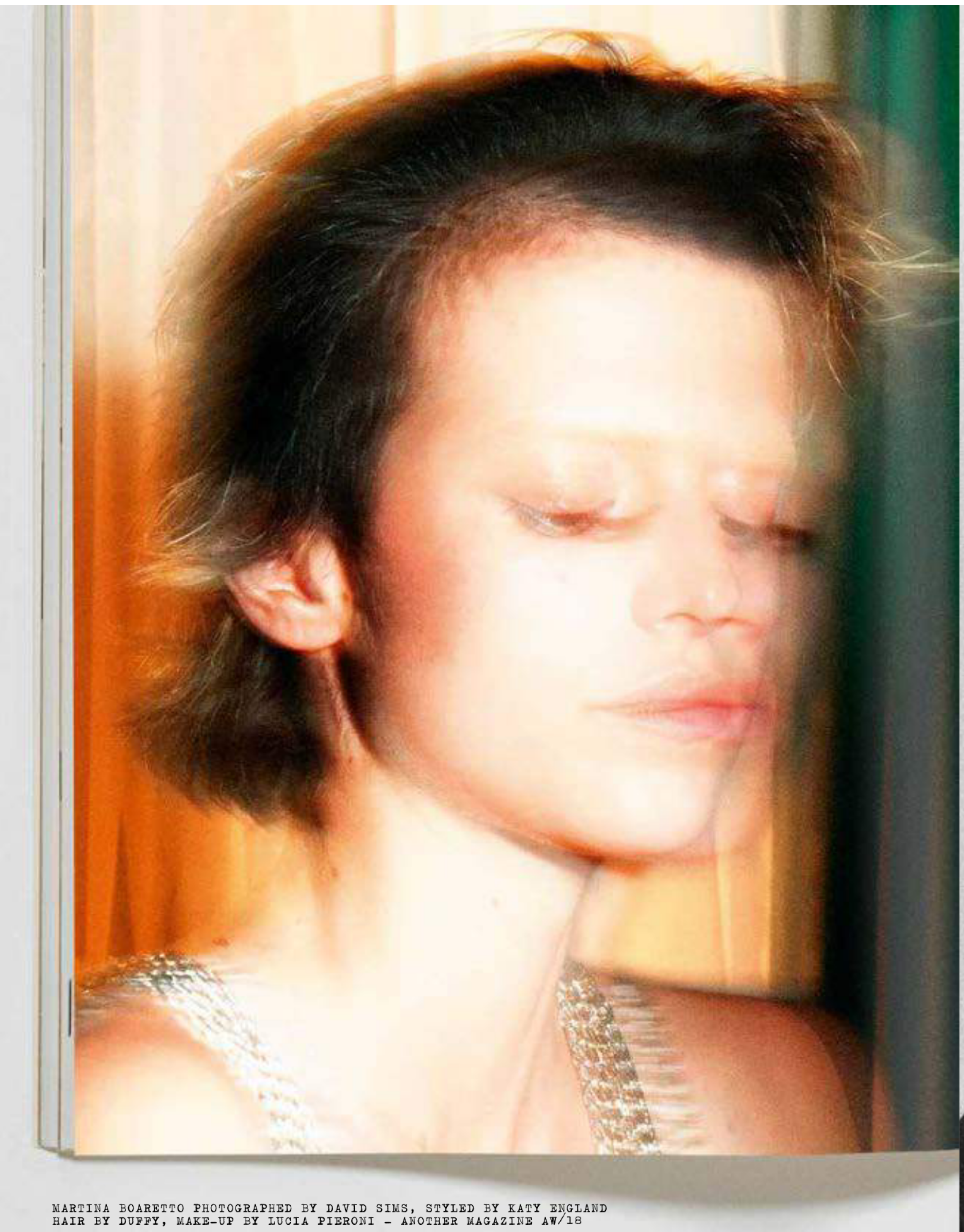
ANAHI PUNTIN PHOTOGRAPHED BY SAM ROCK, STYLED BY KATY ENGLAND
HAIR BY RYAN MITCHELL, MAKE-UP BY HIROMI UEDA – ANOTHER MAGAZINE SS/20



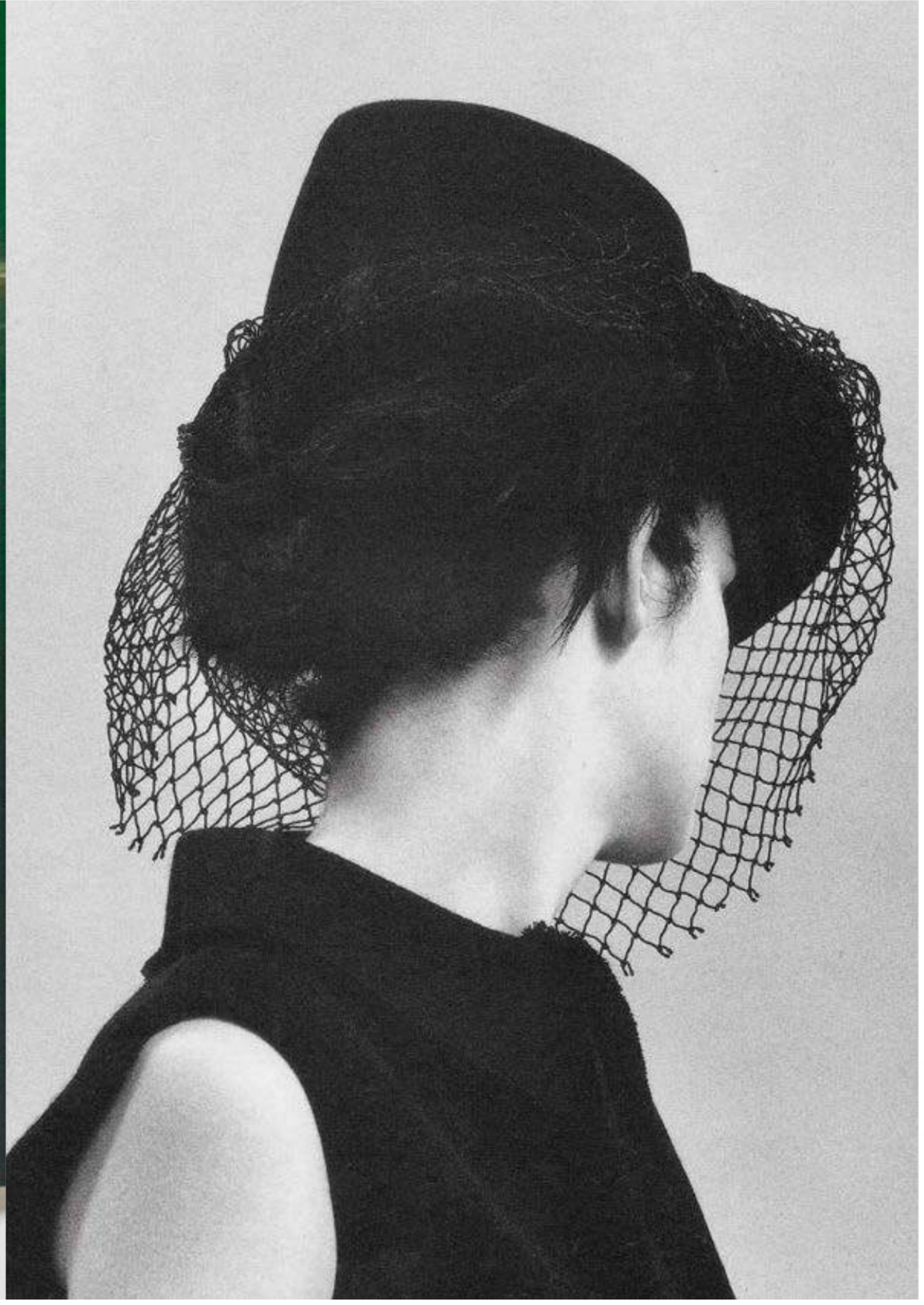
EMILY GAFFORD PHOTOGRAPHED BY PAOLO ROVERSI, STYLED BY HANNES HETTA
HAIR BY EUGENE SOULEIMAN, MAKE-UP BY INGE GROGNARD – ANOTHER MAGAZINE SS/19



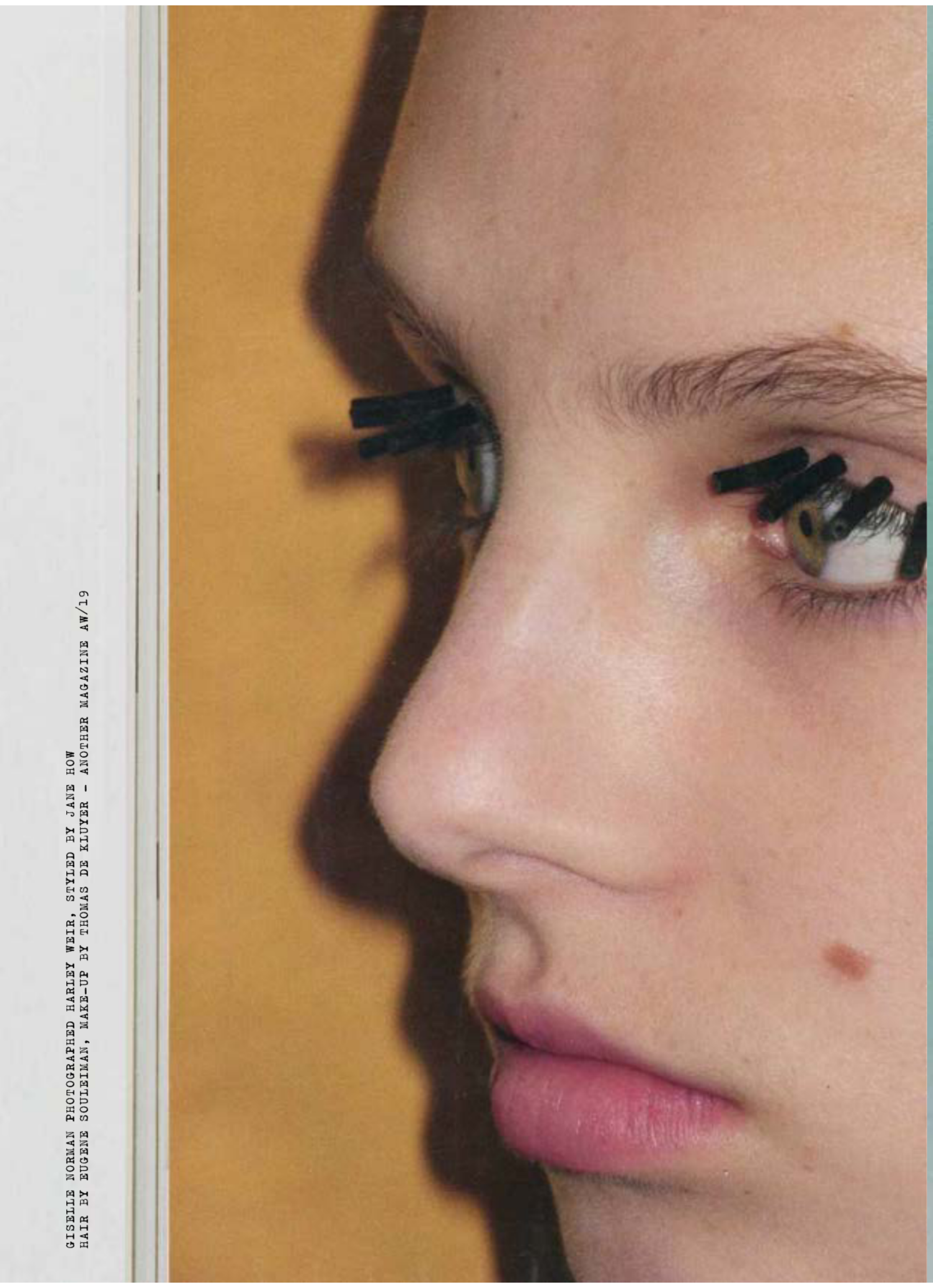
LARA MULLEN PHOTOGRAPHED BY SAM ROCK, STYLED BY KATY ENGLAND
HAIR BY GARY GILL, MAKE-UP BY LUCIA PIERONI – ANOTHER MAGAZINE AW/19



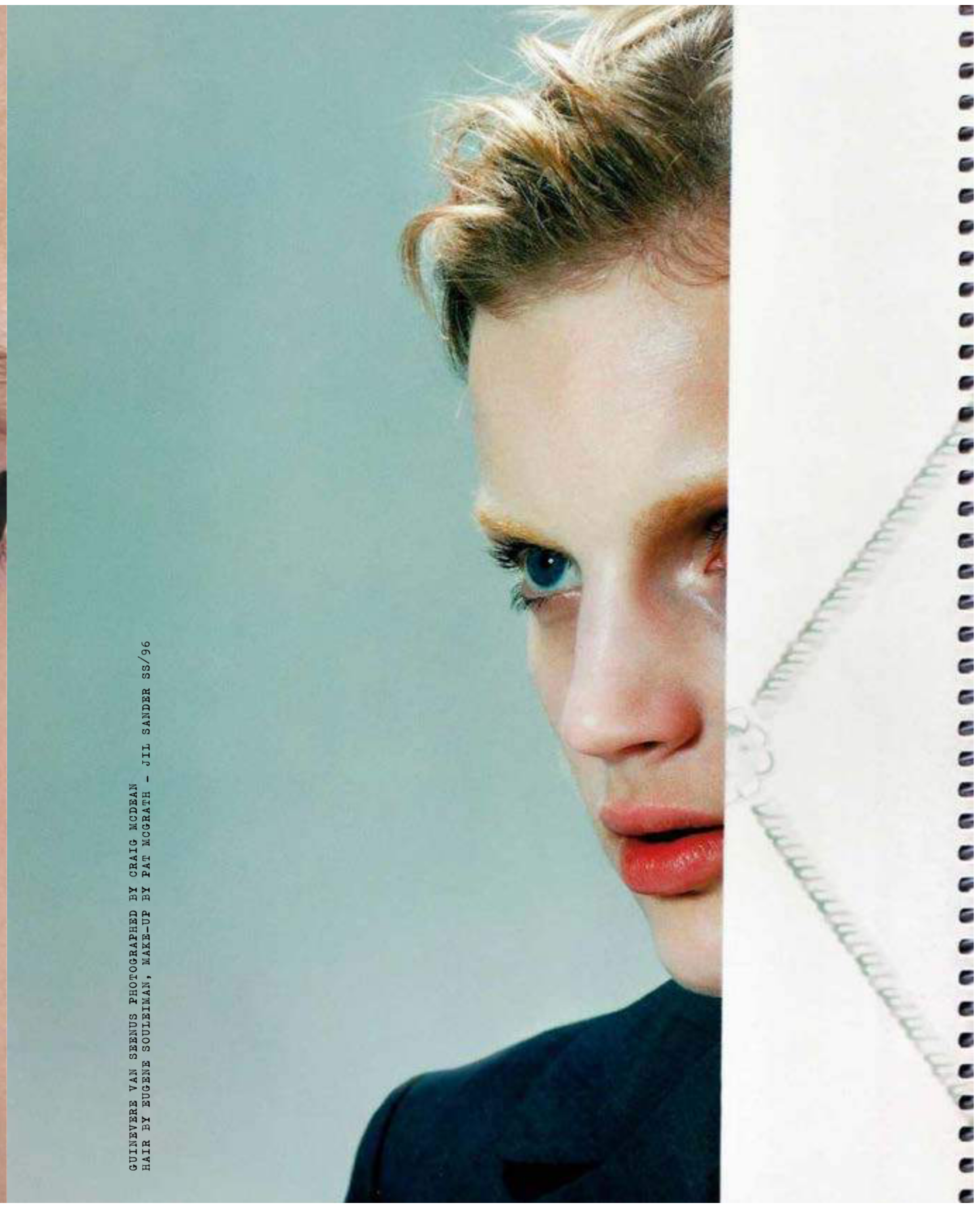
MARTINA BOARETTO PHOTOGRAPHED BY DAVID SIMS, STYLED BY KATY ENGLAND
HAIR BY DUFFY, MAKE-UP BY LUCIA PIERONI – ANOTHER MAGAZINE AW/18



STELLA TENNANT PHOTOGRAPHED BY DAVID SIMS
HAIR BY GUIDO PALAU, MAKE-UP BY LINDA CANTELLO – JIL SANDER AW/95



GISELLE NORMAN PHOTOGRAPHED HARLEY WEIR, STYLED BY JANE HOW
HAIR BY EUGENE SOULEIMAN, MAKE-UP BY THOMAS DE KLUYER – ANOTHER MAGAZINE AW/19



GUINEVERE VAN SEENUS PHOTOGRAPHED BY CRAIG MCDEAN
HAIR BY EUGENE SOULEIMAN, MAKE-UP BY PAT MCGRATH – JIL SANDER SS/96

‘It’s like being a conductor who controls the orchestra with skill and subtlety.’

A conversation with Marc Ascoli, 30 April 2020.

Marc Ascoli: I’m in Paris and it’s not been unpleasant, until today. What drives you a bit mad is how the symptoms keep evolving, so I’ve decided not to take everything I hear too seriously. If it weren’t for all the news on TV, this could be like a holiday.

Thomas Lenthal: Yes, an unexpected holiday. If your life is comfortable, it’s almost nice, but if your life is difficult then it’s 10 times worse. This ‘reset’ is not going to be good for small designers with more complex ideas, for example. There is going to be a brutal cleansing of the market, of brands. Lots of labels are going to disappear.

Marc: Like those small businesses that had problems getting established?

Thomas: Yes, but even medium-sized businesses. And it disturbs me, because we’ll probably end up with a much poorer landscape. So many brands have emerged in the past 10 years or so – just look at all the online shops – maybe the whole ecosystem has become too disparate. You go on to some of these websites and see 500, 600 brands. That’s insane. I think there will be a reset, but this isn’t my area of expertise; maybe I’m wrong.

Marc: Perhaps it’s a good thing. Things will be opened up, tidied up.

Thomas: I don’t know. I don’t think I have any profound insights into the situation. Let’s talk about your portfolio, because you made it spontaneously and naturally.

Marc: To be honest, I didn’t spend a lot of time considering it. I didn’t go round and round in my head wondering how I would do it. I thought it about it in a personal and a practical way, sensitively and emotionally. It contains elements that convey what I want to feel today – not yesterday or tomorrow – when I look at a portfolio of images. I also wanted to put my past work up against my current work, because I’ve got a lot of ongoing image projects. I wanted to find a balance between the two. It all happened quite naturally. I got the idea when I was talking to you, even if it wasn’t 100% formed. I wanted to say something very natural and delicate. When we finished the pages that you offered us – I say ‘we’, because I was working with a studio – we wanted to make a ‘total impression’; you turn the page, turn the page, and… *toc!* So I took care making this selection. At first we put 1990 David [Sims] next to David from today, but then I found that really pretentious. So I threw things up in the air a bit and played around, totally spontaneously, mixing an image from Jean-François Lepage with a black-and-white image by Max Vadukul, and I realized that was pretty strong, and then it all began to flow. What’s the ‘connection’ between the images? It’s in what I’ve just said and the fact that I directed it. No, not directed; I provoked it. I got things going. I say ‘I’, but these were images produced after discussions with Paolo Roversi or Sam Rock. I talked to Johnny Dufort, who did such a strong look with the make-up, and today’s superstar, Lotta Volkova, our friend, who is really extremely talented, and who you work with a lot. She spent some time here, and I only made one image of her work. So these were the things that were blended together, in a way; it was curious, a synergy.

Thomas: When I saw your portfolio, I thought it was fantastic; a collection of portraits when you could have chosen to do only looks, or looks and portraits. Something I think you have contributed to the history of our profession is how you take these models who are photographed and made-up in a certain way, with their hair done a certain way, so that the fashion has to be encapsulated in a face. I like that, because there is nothing more captivating than a face; for me, it’s the most dazzling spectacle. I have always found it such a beautiful and touching approach: crystallizing fashion around the face, the head. One of the things I really love about your work, is that it feels like a dreamy, fantastical portrait gallery. Always clearly of a person, always someone sublime. So it’s interesting that you didn’t mention portraits when you talked about your portfolio.

Marc: I see them more as moments. No, you’re right, they are also portraits. I’m looking at them now. I hadn’t thought about that! You can’t see the fashion.

Thomas: That’s what’s superb, that they don’t show the fashion. I remember an art director at *Dutch* who put fashion credits on pictures of nudes, and that worked really well.

Marc: Matthias Vriens.

> **‘I’d go out in the 1970s and see Grace Jones and Jerry Hall dancing in clubs. These women had long, beautiful legs, and everything smelled of patchouli.’**

Thomas: Do you remember that naked issue of *Dutch* [in 1998]? Eighty-five pages, black-and-white, of nudes by Mikael Jansson. Maybe there was colour, too; it doesn’t matter. Each image was credited to a brand, and it worked incredibly well. You just had the name of the brand; not a scrap of clothing in sight.

Marc: I was also thinking about how to regenerate these images. They first existed in a certain context, and when you take them out of that environment – a magazine, a catalogue – and use them in another, then you reorganize, reinvigorate and regenerate them. That opens them up to other ways of expressing the emotion you are trying convey.

Thomas: Another thing that strikes me is that if you look at your portfolio, unless you’re a great connoisseur of models, it’s impossible to put a date to some of the images, even though some of them are 30 years old, some are 10 years old, some are six months old. That’s how you see an artist: nothing is passé or old-fashioned; nothing is kitsch. You don’t find them only ironically interesting. They have the freshness of a good work of art.

Marc: That’s a lovely compliment, and you’re asking a very precise question. It’s not like I produced it just like that; the process was harder than that. I definitely didn’t want to do retro or nostalgia. There were images that I made for the first issue I did at *AnOther*. They featured these fabulous, extraordinary and beautiful feathers. But they immediately made it look passé. They looked like that image that we all love of Marlene Dietrich. In this context, the old film thing didn’t work. There’s that really strong make-up look by Thomas de Kluyver; he just went for it and destroyed the prevailing aesthetic of older make-up artists with an extraordinary freedom, an energy. He has an extremely modern touch, an amazing energy.

> **‘Yohji is such an intellectual; he thought it was odd that I could be so passionate about fashion photography, about something he thought was futile.’**

Thomas: Do you think restriction is useful or even necessary when it comes to creative work?

Marc: I find it helpful when people explain what they need extremely clearly to me.

Thomas: [Laughs] Have you ever met a client who could do that?

Marc: You know, part of my work is to know how to talk to people. Sometimes I need to put someone at their ease, over several meetings. There are clients who want old and young at the same time, cool, but not too cool, chic, but not too chic. I just finished a project with a client I nearly killed halfway through, and I’m almost glad that there’s the lockdown so I don’t have to carry on. There are always people who are in roles they shouldn’t be in, and who have responsibilities that are beyond them. Let the people who know what they’re doing do what they do. You shouldn’t have a CEO giving directions, just because they have an armada of marketing behind them. But I like restrictions because I regard them as a light that I can follow, and I always start in darkness. How many images do you see every day? How many elegant, chic, modern profiles? I’ve been doing this for a long time, and I’ve worked on the topic several times, though this is the first time I’ve done it in a magazine [*AnOther*], and with an English staff.

Thomas: From what you’ve told me, your English has been sketchy for a long time, which is astonishing considering most of your career has involved working with English speakers. It’s interesting to think about verbal communication rendered a little awkward by an imperfect ability in English. In New York in the 1980s, there were so many French people in our industry who managed to have great careers with 50 words of vocabulary. I’ve known people who have made a fortune in business with an elementary-school level of English.

Marc: It’s a strange experience, but I love it. In the 1980s, in the beginning, I would explain what I liked; I used to get all the books out, look up all the references, look at the photography. But now, and I think this is why you like my portfolio, I’m more interested in creating an emotion, like you all did on the cover with Yohji [for the last issue of *System*]. What’s really important with a cover or a feature is that you should feel an emotion being expressed that draws you into the idea of buying the magazine.

Thomas: That’s interesting. Of course, there are other constraints that can be severe and are nothing to do with the difficulty of a client. You can be restricted by time or by money. Now, for example, we can’t travel, we can’t have more than three people in one room.

Marc: It definitely fuels the imagination. And it also triggers another creative engine: anxiety. When you’re anxious and nervous, you can find certain value in that negativity and pessimism to wind yourself up, to decide to do something new. Maybe you can’t afford to do it one way, so why not do it another? When I started out as an art director, I had huge restrictions. I always wanted to show that you didn't have to do the same thing for everyone. I didn't want to do what Peter Lindbergh had done at Comme des Garçons, just to give you one example. His catalogues were amazing and extremely successful. They were astonishing: the casting, the styling, the clothes; everything was impeccable. Show those catalogues to anyone today, to designers you know, and they're all, like, 'I want to dress like that now.' Azzedine was really influenced by them. Martine [Sitbon] was influenced, too. Even Jonathan Anderson. I saw his last show for Loewe and there was lots of Comme in there, lots of Japanese. But Lindbergh presented it perfectly. And Arthur Elgort; he did some beautiful images. Then I arrived with a new team of photographers, and my restriction was to break out by doing something new. Those restrictions – to be new, more experimental, bolder – really put me in it. As for the restrictions you gave me, I had to think about what I would like people to say when they encounter a small portfolio like this, and how it would change when it was surrounded in the magazine by other artistic directors' different views and voices.

> **'A beautiful fashion photograph should always seduce. That's why we do it: to express seduction, to draw people in, to look, to be fascinated.'**

Thomas: You've already answered this to some extent, but for you, what makes a good fashion photograph, and has that changed over the course of your career?

Marc: A beautiful fashion photograph should seduce; it's always about seduction. That's why we do it: to express a certain form of seduction, to draw people in, to look, to be fascinated. It should be something that we think we know but don't; that we've perhaps seen before in a different context, but when we see it in fashion, it seems true. It should remind the viewer of something in the collective memory. You look and you think, 'I've seen that before', and then realize that you haven't. Some people are very talented at fashion photography, and some people ruin it; some ennoble it, some torment it, some are really classical. But I like all of it, I don't prefer Juergen [Teller] over Nick [Knight]. Did I have that idea when I started out? No, it grew as I went along. I learned everything on the job. I've always worked for myself; I was never someone's assistant. This is a profession you get better and better at doing, because it's a career involving direction. It's like being a conductor who comes to control the orchestra with more and more skill and subtlety. Of course, you can always encounter idiots who want to say the opposite of you, and that's annoying: graphic designers, photographers, models. That's why you need subtlety to get through all of the obstacles. You learn to accept them more easily than you might have done a few years earlier. Before, I could be absolutely horrified by certain attitudes, but now I can see that it's part of their creative practice. I have become more understanding. I don't say, 'I'm never going to work with you again' if I encounter an idiot. I'm more patient, now.

Thomas: Was there a defining image, reference, person or moment from your teenage years that looking back proved instrumental in projecting you towards a career in fashion and art direction?

Marc: A detonator? That's difficult. I'd go back to the 1970s. I used to go out and see models dancing in nightclubs with the VIPs. They were all brilliant and charming; these women had long, beautiful legs: Grace Jones and Jerry Hall; and everything smelled of patchouli. Karl [Lagerfeld] would be in a corner, Kenzo would turn up with his polka-dot bow tie.

Thomas: Did you go to Le Sept?

Marc: Le Sept, Le Palace, but mostly to Le Sept because I was so young. It really left its mark on me. I was disgusted, at times, too, because there were dark things going on; it was weird. There was a lot of sexuality in that period – it was pre-AIDS – and some of it was quite violent. I remember it well – it's really vivid – and I remember the aesthetically striking images, like Antonio Lopez's, for example. If I see them today, I'm immediately transported back to that time. It really made an impact on me: the luxury; the way they moved; the 'proudness', even arrogance. But it was also very open; not regimented and managed like parties today. It was much less 'business'.

Thomas: There was a fraction of the money around then compared to today!

Marc: It was more accessible. It was a demonstration of how to be bohemian, chic and flamboyant; I can still see the satin, the dots, the sequins. And it made an impact on me, in that I thought it would be amazing to be part of that world. When I did the Chloé book a few years ago,[1] I threw myself into the archives and found myself back in that period. It was so extraordinary: the energy, the models, the photographers. It was such a memorable time, and then it changed for me, because I started working with the Japanese. That was the total opposite in terms of fashion. Yohji is an intellectual…

Thomas: It was interesting how the pair of you combined two worlds that, on paper, appeared to be polar opposites.

Marc: What I brought to Yohji were energy and 'fashion'. My tastes are, if I'm being honest, light-hearted and fun, sort of deep with a form of lightness. He liked that a lot; he enjoyed the story I was telling, that joyful vision. His fashion was serious, magnificent and ostentatious, and I think he liked the idea of putting it on girls who were kind of cool. He gave me free rein with the make-up, hair and photographer. It was necessarily glam, but it had a certain energy.

Thomas: With Yohji, I remember there was the cigarette and the woman on the leather sofas.

Marc: Yes, and Yohji both liked it and didn't like it. He wasn't, 'wow'; he had to be pushed a bit. You've interviewed him, you know what he likes; he loves black and white, for example. At the same time, he let me work. He liked that I was enthusiastic. He loved that I was all, like, 'Wow, look how beautiful she is! Look at this!' He was such an intellectual; he thought it was so odd that someone would be so passionate about fashion photographs, about something he thought was kind of futile and beneath him. But then again, it worked; he found it entertaining and it gave him a lot of energy for his work.

> **'When you're anxious and nervous, you can find certain value in that negativity and pessimism to wind yourself up, to decide to do something new.'**

Thomas: Can you give an example of what you find most intuitive in your work and what you tend to overthink? I was struck by how you said that you didn't think too deeply about your portfolio, but when it was done you realized it had a depth that you hadn't necessarily planned.

Marc: It's all about awareness and confidence. For me, things function because I make sure to communicate directly with the person I'm working with. I communicated with Yohji, with Jil [Sander], and now I'm doing the same with Julien Dossena [at Paco Rabanne]. Of course, when you start out, you're anxious, not least because there's a lot of money involved. Everyone knows what it's like to be asked to do something and you don't know whether you can deliver. And I have a long career, a weight of experience, high standards. So when someone hires me, behind me there are all the images I've done, the people I've discovered. People might expect something specific, but you can't produce exactly what you produced years ago, the way they want it. The situation is completely different. It's always helpful to remember that each time is a new, amazing chance to produce beautiful images. That is the stimulus. Thomas, when you look at the Dior campaign you did with Nick Knight, you must feel such pleasure.

Thomas: Yes, that was an absolutely sensational time. It was fabulous. It was an extraordinary collaboration with Nick.[2] Before we began, I took Nick some drawings by Antonio – it was the two girls on the motorbike – and we shot Gisele and Rhea, one behind the other, in the sky. It was pretty amazing. And we had a week to do the images.

Marc: And John [Galliano] was so excited and happy with it.

Thomas: He trusted us; he was happy. He would come and go. He could see that it was working brilliantly. It was exciting. Another question: do you prefer your work to appeal to a niche, specialist demographic or do you prefer a broader audience?

Marc: Both require the same level of work and commitment. To do something really cool for a magazine, I have to find new talent or set things up or find something that's 'elevated'. The English are always saying that word and I love it; it's so chic. Then when I did the Armani beauty campaign [in 2018], it was for a billion people. When you start on something as important as that, you have to get over some of your own issues. It really made me stronger, because I was convinced I couldn't do it. To be honest, I prefer working with people who understand it all. With a connoisseur, I can play with subtleties. I can make a tiny adjustment, and for them it's something completely new. But really, it's always about the individuals, the people you're working with. When you talked about the commercial and financial crisis that is going to hit us, I immediately thought, 'We need good quality people now.'

Thomas: You've said that when you worked for Yohji, you talked to him as if in an imaginary conversation. It's awful working for people you have no desire to have a conversation with.

Marc: But do you manage it?

Thomas: Sometimes I find myself in work situations where conversation seems impossible, because there is such a gulf between you and the other person. It's not necessarily a cultural difference, but when there is insincerity in the relationship. That's awful.

Marc: When I see certain ad campaigns, they have a coldness about them, something mechanical.

Thomas: It feels like they've just gone through the motions. It's completely meaningless.

Marc: We have to get out of this mechanical vision of the subject. It feels like we are drowning in so many products with only a narrow creative idea behind them. These designers are all on a conveyor belt, because they're dealing with people behind the scenes who don't communicate. They don't discuss anything with the designer. If stopping for two months restarts the conversation…

'When I did the Armani beauty campaign, it was for a billion people. When you do something as big as that, you have to get over some of your own issues.'

Thomas: Describe a professional disappointment and what you learned from it.

Marc: I've been working for a long time, so there have been a few. And there have been as many delightful times as there have been disappointing ones. Disappointment always arrives when you are least expecting it, and you never expect it to happen to you! Of course, there's the cliché that what doesn't kill you makes you stronger, and it's true. I've had times when life has punched me in the face, or no one has been willing to help me out. Remember when you did that article about me? I really appreciated that, because at that time…

Thomas: Let's just say that you didn't have a private jet to lend me! [Laughs]

Marc: Everything that has happened has taught me not to have delusions about things, to take a step back, to be less fiery. Coming from Tunisia, I'm quite dramatic, quite southern, but life has calmed me down.

Thomas: Which person working within the fashion industry do you most admire, and why?

Marc: In the fashion world? I don't have a single icon; I've got a few in my pantheon: Avedon, for total classicism. When I see certain images he did, I'm still impressed. That series of little adverts he did in Japan in the 1970s, you can see them on YouTube.[3] I could have worked with him, but never mind. I've always liked Steven Meisel. I was clearing up earlier and I saw the 2012 Prada campaign he did, which was extraordinary. There was nothing mechanical about that; you really got a sense of the Italian woman. It's hard, because you meet people in your everyday life who charm you, but in general, it's people who you admire from afar who inspire you. I don't really know Steven very well, even if I worked with him at *W* with Edward Enninful. What he delivered was great; Edward was really into it. There are other photographers I admire, but I won't mention them all. Irving Penn, for example. What I don't like is when people reveal everything about themselves. When I'm a real fan of someone and admire them, I'd rather not know everything about them. I need to preserve some glamour and mystique.

Thomas: You have to maintain a certain eroticism, some mystery. If you know too much, the seduction wears off. Another question: what do you know now about the fashion industry that you didn't when you were entering the industry? It's changed so much…

Marc: True, but I'm not pessimistic. This industry is made up of people who respect each other. I mean, look at how you have invited everyone for this issue, you didn't have to do that.

Thomas: I'm giving exposure to competitors!

Marc: But you've done that a few times, haven't you?

Thomas: Yes, it doesn't bother me. I'm a good comrade! As things hopefully return to some level of normality, will your impulse be to explore notions of fantasy and escapism, or will you be more inclined to double-down on realism, documenting the moment? Your world is very dream-like and lyrical, in a subtle and elegant way.

Marc: Definitely less fashion. By that I mean fashion in the sense of 'high fashion'. Fashion in the sense of *Grand Hotel*. It will be more considered, more sensitive. Not just documenting people who are only obsessed with one thing. People who also read, maybe, or who are concerned about the planet; people who are interested in more than shopping or choosing their next lipstick. I definitely want to document something more meaningful; something that opens us up. I think that is the first essential thing.

Thomas: No more frivolity.

Marc: No, no, it would be awful if there were no frivolity!

Thomas: Of course, frivolity is part of civilization.

Marc: And it plays a huge part in the ingredients of our subject. It's strange, I've done *AnOther* for two years now – four issues – and some things are already old-fashioned. You can't keep telling the same stories, or telling stories in the same way. This crash, in these two months, is incredible. It's a real rupture. I don't know how people are going to put on fashion shows. I don't think there'll be many, in any case. They won't be able to afford to put them on or they won't have the clothes.

Thomas: Or the distancing issues will prevent them from happening, maybe. Perhaps they will be banned.

Marc: If we were to carry on in the way we were before, it would be a bit indecent.

Thomas: With the big shows, I think that if you're not there in-person and you only see them on TV, they have absolutely no value as a spectacle. The way they are filmed is very…

Marc: Cheap. You remember the show we both saw at Chanel with those huge chandeliers?[4] It was so real, but when I saw the photos it looked totally bourgeois. The lightness of it all was gone.

Thomas: People will have to find a way to make them interesting even if you are watching them in your own home. It's a question I ask people, because I see them spending ridiculous amounts of money on a show that lasts 15 minutes, put on for people who are barely interested. The public version should do justice to the money spent. It's a real question: how do we represent things now?

Marc: It's important. It's what I've been discussing with Jefferson [Hack] and Susannah [Frankel at *AnOther*]: how to produce images, how to do photography.

Thomas: You're not a monthly, you're a bi-annual. Can you imagine what it must be like at a monthly? You have no staff; you have nothing. Your means of production are on standby; you can't send out your teams; you have to do everything at a distance. It's bizarre.

Marc: And you can't show what you used to show in the same way. You just can't. It won't work in the same way. Everyone will have to ask themselves the same question, and I don't know the answer. I want to reveal something different, but I'm also here to make people dream. That's my job. If you want to talk about 'magic', then that is my magic.

Thomas: There's a very nice term in English that doesn't really exist in French: escapism.

Marc: It's great. That is my job: escapism.

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1. *Chloé: Attitudes*, a history of the label with creative direction by Ascoli and text by Sarah Mower, was published in 2013 by Rizzoli.

2. The images of Gisele Bündchen and Rhea Durham were for the Dior Spring/Summer 2000 campaign.

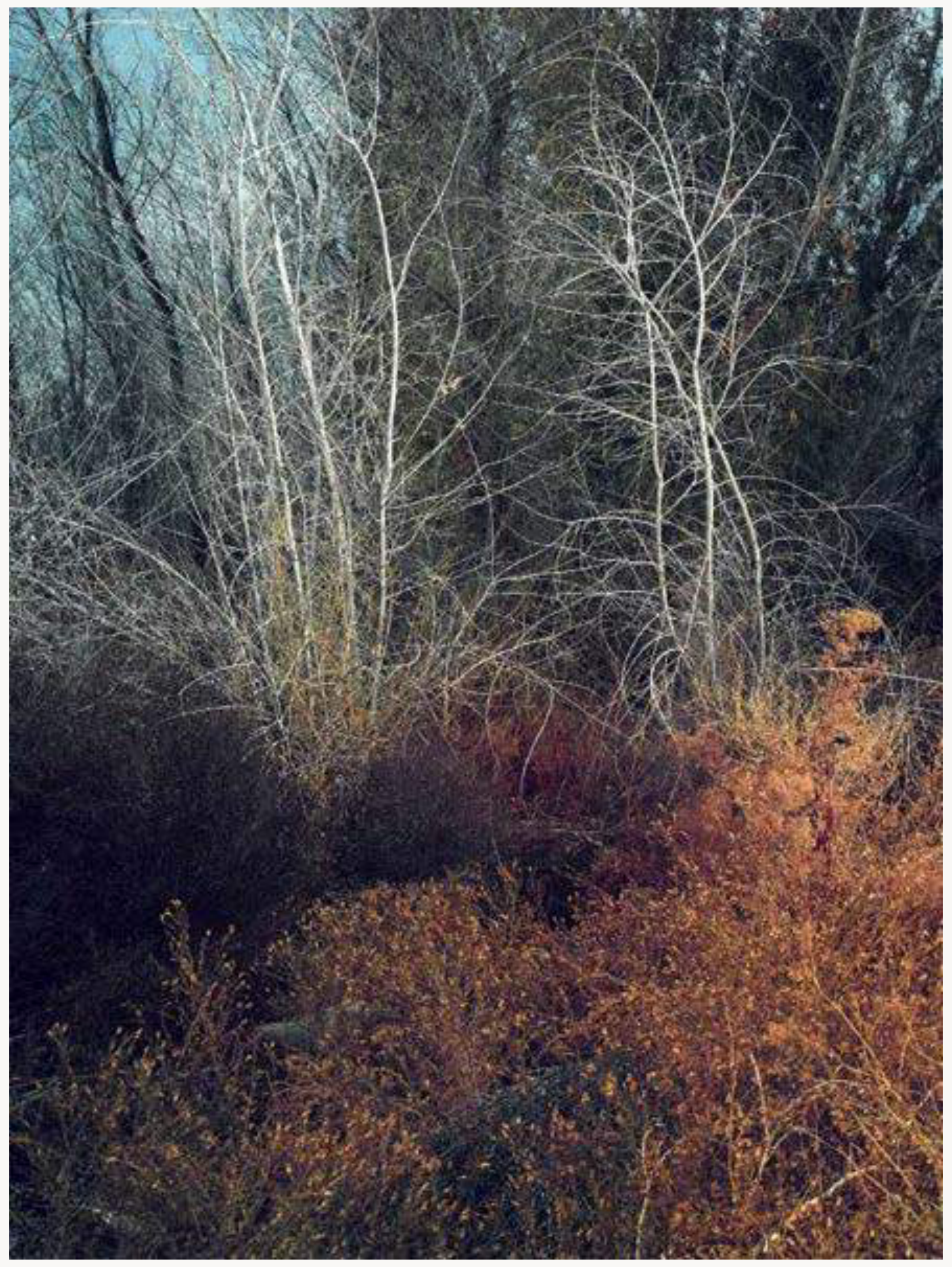
3.In 1973, Richard Avedon made a series of advertisements for Japanese womenswear brand Jun Ropé (slogan: 'Dessiné pour les jeunes gens par les jeunes gens'). Starring Lauren Hutton, Angelica Huston and Jean Shrimpton and titled 'Classical Elegance', the films parodied the characters and mores of the traditional fashion shoot. Avedon himself played a bossy photographer.

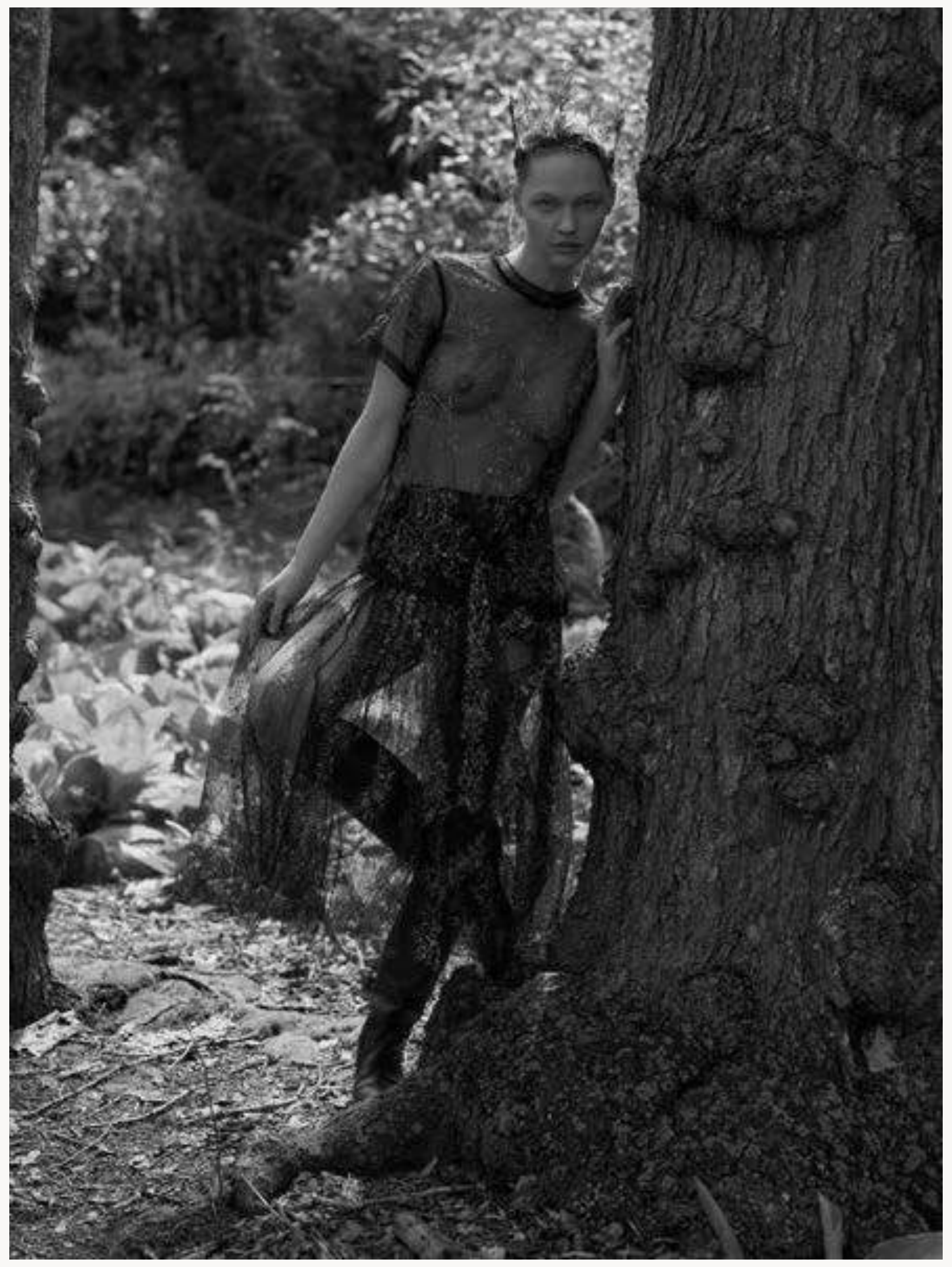
4. Chanel's Métiers d'art 2019-2020 show was entitled 31 *Rue Cambon* and featured a set that recreated Coco Chanel's apartment, including its extravagant chandelier lighting.

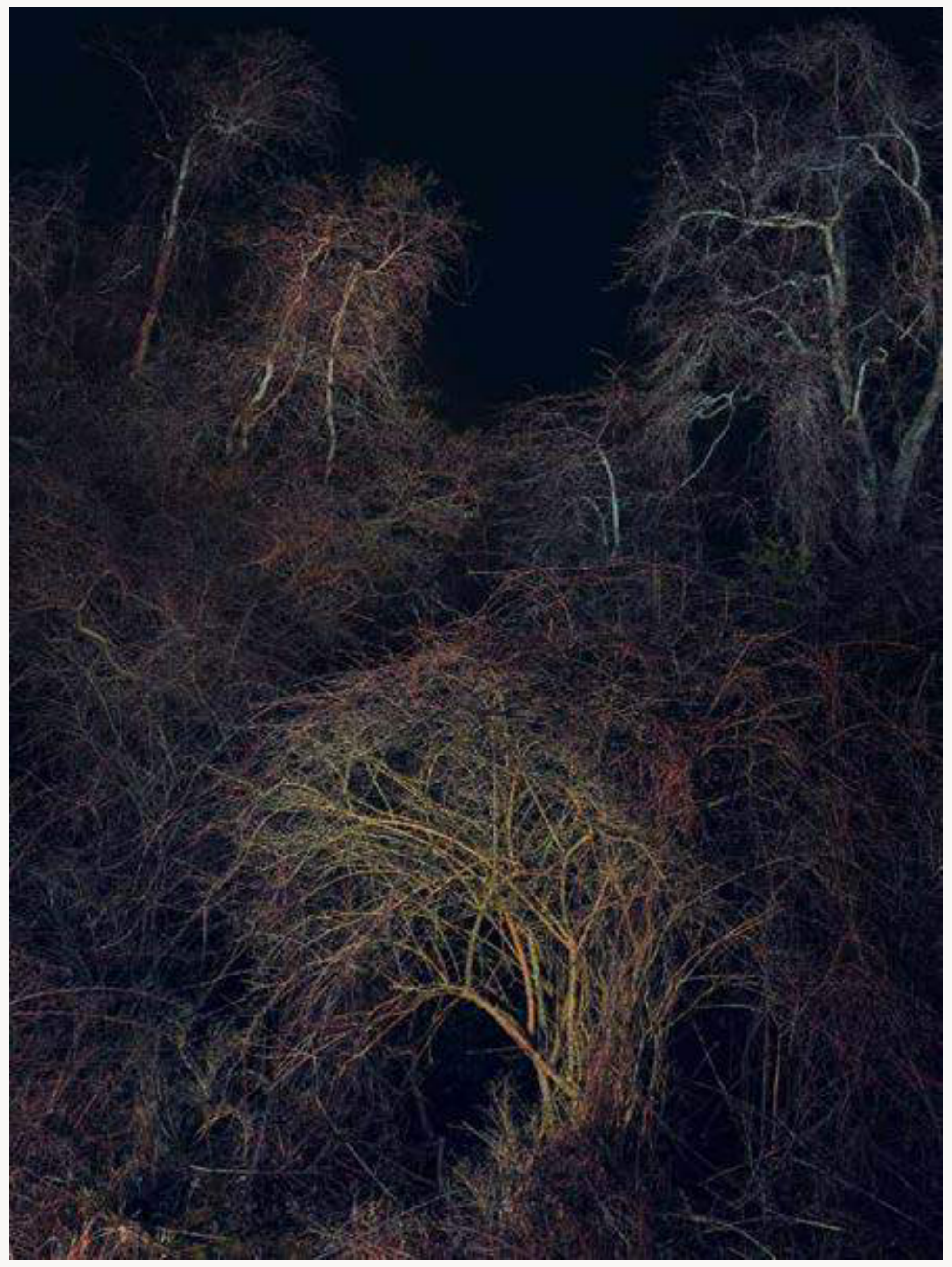
NATURE WINS

A portfolio *by* FABIEN BARON starring SASHA PIVOVAROVA. Styled *by* LUDIVINE POIBLANC

All clothing *by* CHRISTIAN DIOR. Head pieces handmade *by* SASHA PIVOVAROVA







'Success is when the brand you work for is successful.'

A conversation with Fabien Baron, 7 May 2020.

Thomas: First of all, thank you for participating. I am really touched that you produced something so considered and beautiful. It feels very you and very intimate. I'm honoured you did it for us.

Fabien: You know, I am not primarily a fashion photographer. I love photography and I love art, and I do my own work, mostly landscapes and different things that people haven't seen so much of. It was really nice to do a fashion story in a context where things have changed drastically, and where you don't have the usual team available. It is really different to work under those conditions. It was both difficult, because you couldn't rely on the same stylistic tricks, and amazing, because we had the freedom to do something really intimate and personal. Even though we kept distanced the whole time, you get really one-on-one with the person you are photographing. You don't have a crowd around you, looking and judging and interfering in that intimacy. It felt really good, because it reminded me much more of the way I take pictures on my own, when I'm getting up at five in the morning to take pictures on the beach, or when I am in a landscape and I get into my own head space. It was a very similar feeling, and that's maybe why those pictures are kind of intimate. That is why I combined them with landscapes, because I felt the connection between the two was very important.

'It's all about if the client had fun and is happy with 'the experience'. What about the result? You could have had the worst time: it's the result that counts.'

The model for the pictures, Sasha [Pivovarova], is a friend of mine – I've worked with her now for many years – so there is something knowing there. I know what she is about; I know her as a friend, and I wanted to express something that felt quite personal.

Thomas: Probably up until the mid-, maybe late-1970s, the crowd surrounding a photographer during a shoot was relatively small. If you think about the 1950s and 1960s, all those great pictures were taken in an intimate environment. Irving Penn, for example, probably didn't have more than five people around him when he was taking his pictures. This project has a sense of nostalgia about the quality of a moment that can come through in the picture because of the less-contrived circumstances.

Fabien: It's the way we are used to working today. In editorial commercial work, there are just huge expectations. People are used to working in a mood-board way, like, 'We want to do this story, so we do a mood board and then copy the pictures.' The teams are larger, and everyone's got their own expectations and their own ideas about how things should look; there are all these preconceived ideas. The photographer then needs to be part of that group, otherwise the pictures they take won't meet other people's expectations. Just let the photographer take the shoot some place, give the work room to breathe, to get somewhere. That is the danger of how we have been working: you can precook the image before you've even made it. That said, working with an exceptional team can really take the work to the next level. With this portfolio, it was just me and Ludivine [Poiblanc, stylist and Baron's wife] and Sasha and our kids. When you have to change the lenses yourself, everything is slower, a little bit amateurish, but the spontaneity becomes more apparent. That happened even in the way Sasha was modelling. She wasn't doing it in front of a huge team, and that changes things. We were chatting, we talked about things, then we took a picture, she showed me something, then we stopped and had lunch, we spoke later in the afternoon and then took more pictures. Our houses are very close to one another, so we'd meet up again three or four hours later, when the light was much better. If we didn't have enough we knew we could come back the next day, so it was very spontaneous and friendly and really open and easy. There is a beauty in that; a beauty in being able to work with total freedom, which is what it felt like.

Thomas: It certainly comes through. I want to come back to one of things you said initially, that you are not a fashion photographer. Do you say that because this is not your main source of income, or…?

Fabien: No, I say it because I don't consider myself a fashion photographer. I have my advertising agency, I am a creative director and I develop concepts for brands. That is my main activity. Photography has been part of my life forever – since I was 16 or 17 – and I have grown into taking pictures on my own, on the side, as an artist. For me, photography is art – it's not fashion – so that is what I am doing when I take pictures. It is my work and my art, and I do it very seriously. I have produced a tremendous amount of work over the years, though not much of that work has yet been published. There has been only one book [*Liquid Light 1983-2003*]. I haven't done any shows or made any prints, but I have a huge archive of about 30 years of work. When you look at my work as a graphic designer you would think, 'Oh, he has done so much', but there's just as much again in art photography. It's a big pile and a strong body of work that remains unexplored because I've never put the time into doing it. It's never felt the right moment to go and do that.

Thomas: Maybe you'll be confined for another couple of months, and you can start looking into your archives more seriously!

Fabien: I have been looking. I have an office in my building and I have started to look at the archive over the past year. When I was finishing the book [*Fabien Baron: Works 1983-2019*], I was looking at all the work and thinking it is time to print, to do a show, to do a different kind of book. Now this other part of myself needs to be known; this other side that is crucial to me. Maybe I need to show that to the world. I've kept it very much to myself, and I never wanted to show it to anyone. It was an internal search, and now that I feel comfortable, I want that work to be shown. Some of it is in this story: the treatment, the way these images are handled. I think it was important to steer this story this way, because I didn't want it to automatically be a fashion story. I felt the moment was important, and with a person like Sasha, who is also an artist, I wanted to give a message that was more personal, more artistic and more intimate.

'I'm really attached to Dior, because my dad worked on the original logo and then I did, too. It is a cultural brand that makes people dream.'

Thomas: Can fashion photography ever reach a level of artistry?

Fabien: Irving Penn, Avedon and Bourdin elevated fashion photography to the level of art, for sure, and many other photographers have done that, too. Anything can be art – but I can't pretend as a fashion photographer that I have elevated the medium to that level.

Thomas: What in your eyes constitutes a good fashion image, and has this definition remained the same throughout your career?

Fabien: I look at two values: the style that I see in an image and the emotion I can feel in an image. Style is fashion, fashion is about style: you can't have one without the other. An image needs to transmit style; that is so important and really not easy. Hair, make-up, styling, colours – there are so many variables to take into account. It's just so complex and difficult to understand. Style needs be in tune with the time we are living in, with what is going on, and it is one component. The other component is emotion. On a personal level, I think that is so important. For me, these two things are what make a really good fashion photograph. There are other important elements, obviously, such as whether a picture is compositionally or technically correct, and what you do with the subjects in an image.

Thomas: Obviously, great models play an incredible part in the success of a great fashion picture; they bring so much to the table. When you talk about Sasha, I sense that she had a genuine understanding of the context and what she needed to do, and she gave that naturally because she is a smart supermodel.

Fabien: It is the same with Kate [Moss]. Certain models really know what they are doing. You are capturing a soul, a moment, and an emotion; that is important, if you don't want the image to feel blank. There are emotions and feelings and thoughts beyond the eyes, and capturing those can change everything in a picture. That is the emotional side.

Thomas: Would you say that a great fashion picture is, above all, a great portrait? I'm thinking about great fashion photographers who are also great portrait photographers: Avedon and Penn, to name just two.

Fabien: Their work went so much further than fashion. Avedon, for example, did everything: he did fashion; he photographed America, like so many different types of people; he covered historical ground that other photographers never would. He was intrigued by things other than fashion. He was obsessed with Diane Arbus; you can tell he was in awe of her work when you see his.

Thomas: Do you find restriction useful or even necessary when it comes to creative work?

Fabien: It's a good thing. When the landscape is vast and you can go anywhere you want, you can get a blank-page feeling. When you are forced to shoot with restrictions – this is the light, this is the model, these are the clothes – you first scratch your head, then you find a solution. When you have the blank canvas you think it is going to come to you, but you have to go out and get it. You almost have to put up your own roadblocks, and that's a difficult exercise. I do that with my personal work, when I have no one telling me what to do. I might take a series of extremely repetitive pictures and images just to understand what I am looking at and how I can create a true interpretation of that environment in a way that meets my own vision. As creative directors, we get restrictions in our work every day – and it's no bad thing. You may not agree with those restrictions, and so you have to work around them most of the time, which means you become this amazing problem-solver. You develop an ability to work around things. It's an exercise, like running, like doing a marathon every day. It's not easy – not everyone can do it – but because you do it every day, you learn to problem-solve quickly. In the job we do, you need that type of mind.

Thomas: You need to be a problem-solver, and that is exactly what we were thinking for this issue. We had a huge problem and thought, 'Who are the guys who can find solutions?' And I was, like, 'We should talk to creative directors!'

Fabien: It's a great idea. I can't wait to see what they have all done. To be honest, we had so many great ideas. Some would have been more fabulous, but would have required more time than the deadline permitted. Then I thought: I'm here in the Hamptons; I'm two houses away from my friend Sasha; I take pictures; I have relationships with certain clients, so that I can get clothes immediately. I felt it was the best solution; to make representations of the way I am living at the moment. It was a chance to present a certain intimacy, something personal. The portrait with things coming out of the head, almost like thoughts and dreams about nature, that felt like a pretty good reflection of how I felt. The Dior aspect was important, too. I'm really attached to the brand, because my dad worked on the original logo and then later on I did, too. It is a cultural brand that makes people dream.

> **'I always ask the client for the numbers: what are the sales? How did it do? Did it do well? I am always asking them: 'Does it work?''**

Thomas: What is intuitive in your work and what do you tend to overthink?

Fabien: Every time I get into the studio I like things to find their own way, to an extent, so I tend to follow what I feel, although I may change something at the last minute. A lot of people work in a very precise way; they do a lot of preparation, come up with a specific idea, which they develop and then shoot in the studio. I tend towards a process where I get to the studio and I realize, like, this is a day for cooking, not theory. And the results are what count, so I am not afraid to throw out one part entirely if I see that it will make other parts work better. I am intuitive in that way; I let things happen. Clients, photographers, models: not everybody likes that; not everyone wants to work like that. There is this thing about 'the experience'. For the past 10 years it has been all about 'the experience' on the shoot, and if the client is happy with 'the experience' and had fun. And I'm, like, what about the result? You could have had the worst time, but it's the result that counts. The end result has always been my goal.

Thomas: I have tremendous respect for what you have done, because, in my eyes, one of your greatest successes has been to bring sophistication to a wider audience.

Fabien: It's fantastic when you reach a lot of people, because you feel part of the world and affecting the wider culture, to some degree. All great artists affect the culture around them: Picasso, Warhol, Avedon. Also, of course, if your voice is heard by more people it has more impact, that goes without saying. Most artists, I would imagine, would like to be recognized by many, many people.

Thomas: Some of our peers say they are far more interested in the niche audience. They would rather have the conversation with the people who understand exactly what they are trying to say.

Fabien: That is lovely. That's great, but is that because it's really hard when you do something you think is amazing and then people don't like it? There is an intimacy about that as well. To be honest, I've never thought about whether I was reaching out to a lot of people or just a few, or if I prefer a smaller or bigger crowd. If there is a problem in front of me, then my role is just to resolve it to the best of my ability. I am obviously interested in both audiences, because on the one hand there is the work I have done for Calvin Klein and on the Madonna *Sex* book, which reached millions of people, and then there is all of my own work, which I have showed to perhaps 10 people. I am intrigued by both sides; they are both valid. It depends on what you want to say. Some things are more anonymous. When

you put the name Calvin Klein on my work, that is not my work, that is the work of Calvin Klein. I have been taking my own images for 40 years; there are series that I started shooting in the early 1980s, and I am still shooting the same image today, the same picture. I have never really done anything with those; it is work for an audience of one, or perhaps a few people, but it is highly personal. It is all about me, so it requires a different approach. For that, maybe I'd rather it be in a niche environment.

Thomas: Of course. Which person within the fashion industry do you most admire and why?

Fabien: I admire designers, in many ways; I admire certain photographers. There are certain people that I feel very attached to on a creative level. I feel very close to Steven Meisel, and I am still extremely impressed by the way he works, his manner and the way he does things. David Sims, Mario Sorrenti and Craig McDean are photographers I worked with early on in their careers, and I have tremendous respect for them. There are so many people I respect, like Guido [Palau], because I think he is a creative director, more than a hairdresser. He has a tremendous understanding of style and what fashion should be. Someone like Pat McGrath, Karl Templer; I am usually very impressed by people who take their work and their craft to the nth degree, far and beyond other people's stuff.

> **'People are going to have to go back to their roots and consider why they are here, what made them who they are, and think about embracing their past.'**

Thomas: What does success look like?

Fabien: Success is when the brand you work for is successful.

Thomas: Do you ask for the numbers?

Fabien: I always ask for the numbers: what are the sales? How did it do? Did it do well? I am always asking: 'Does it work?'

Thomas: Describe a professional disappointment and what you learned from experience.

Fabien: There are a few jobs that you get involved in where you have your doubts about the relationship, but you start doing the work, and then it just falls apart and you end up not just stuck in the corner, but stuck in the basement. There is no light, nothing, and the solution doesn't come. When that happens, you learn a lot, like how you need to tick a couple of boxes before saying yes to a job. I have learned to do that. I want the job and the work to be successful; I want it to be really successful and not fail. So I am going to make sure that I step into an environment where I am able to bring success. Each client is a case study: should you do it this way, is it good if we push them? There are all of these questions that need to be asked beforehand. I never just jump on a job. It all needs to be clear. The only job I said yes to on the spot was Franca Sozzani at Italian *Vogue*. We didn't talk that much, I just said yes. I was very young, and I had turned down French *Vogue* and American *Vogue* and I was, like, 'What kind of a moron turns down these magazines?' Then Franca called! I knew what she was doing; I adored what she was doing. We worked with the same photographers and I admired her, so we barely said anything. She called me and said, 'I'm looking for an art director.' I said yes. I didn't even think about how I would have to go to Italy, I just said yes. It was the right thing to do.

Thomas: As things gradually return to some level of normality, will your impulse be to explore notions of fantasy and escapism or to double down on realism and documenting the moment?

Fabien: As with everything, it will be a mix. I don't like extreme ways of looking at things, because they rule out different perspectives. Both ideas are valid; it is what you do with them that will make a difference. People will want to dream, as they do in every bad historical moment. There's always been room for dreamers. Hollywood during the war was full of that, making people laugh and giving them an escape. Comedy is a form of escapism; beauty is a form of escapism. Obviously, things have changed. Nostalgia for the way things were is going to play a huge part. Personally, I feel like going back to basics, as we all did around the world: waking up, cleaning, cooking. I think that will have a huge impact on what is happening next. And I am sure that, to some degree, fashion is going to have to go back to basics in terms of design.

Thomas: To being practical and well made, you mean?

Fabien: I don't know exactly, but people are probably going to have to go back to their roots and consider why they are here, what made them who they are, and think about embracing their past. Returning to the simplicity of square one, and asking how best to move forward. It's not a time for something frivolous – frivolous is not something I think would work right now.

PARKED
BY
GB65

Missoni SS20
Model: Bella Hadid
Photographer: Mert & Marcus

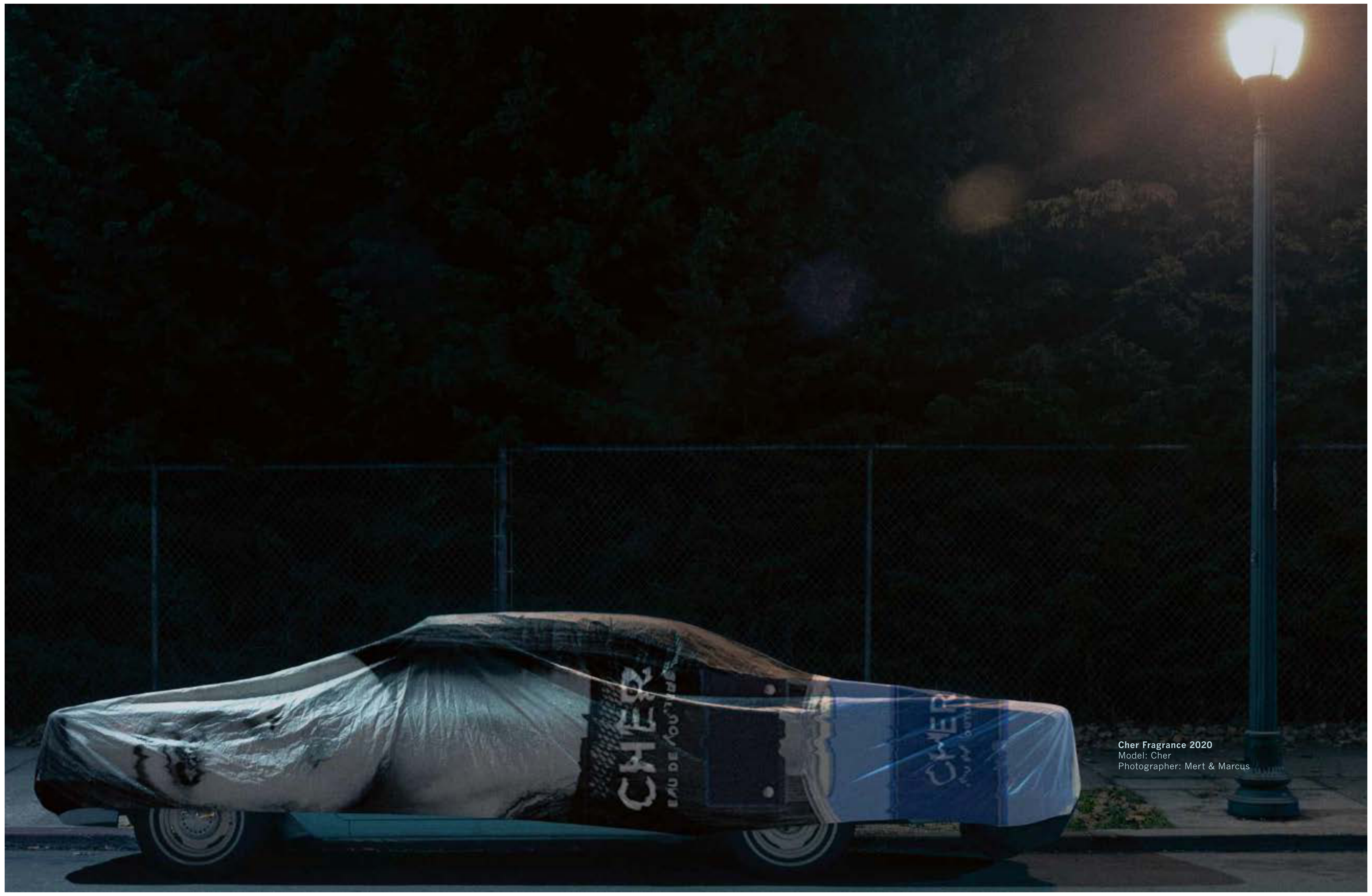
VERSACE
VERSACE

Versace FW13
Model: Kate Moss and Saskia de Brauw
Photographer: Mert & Marcus

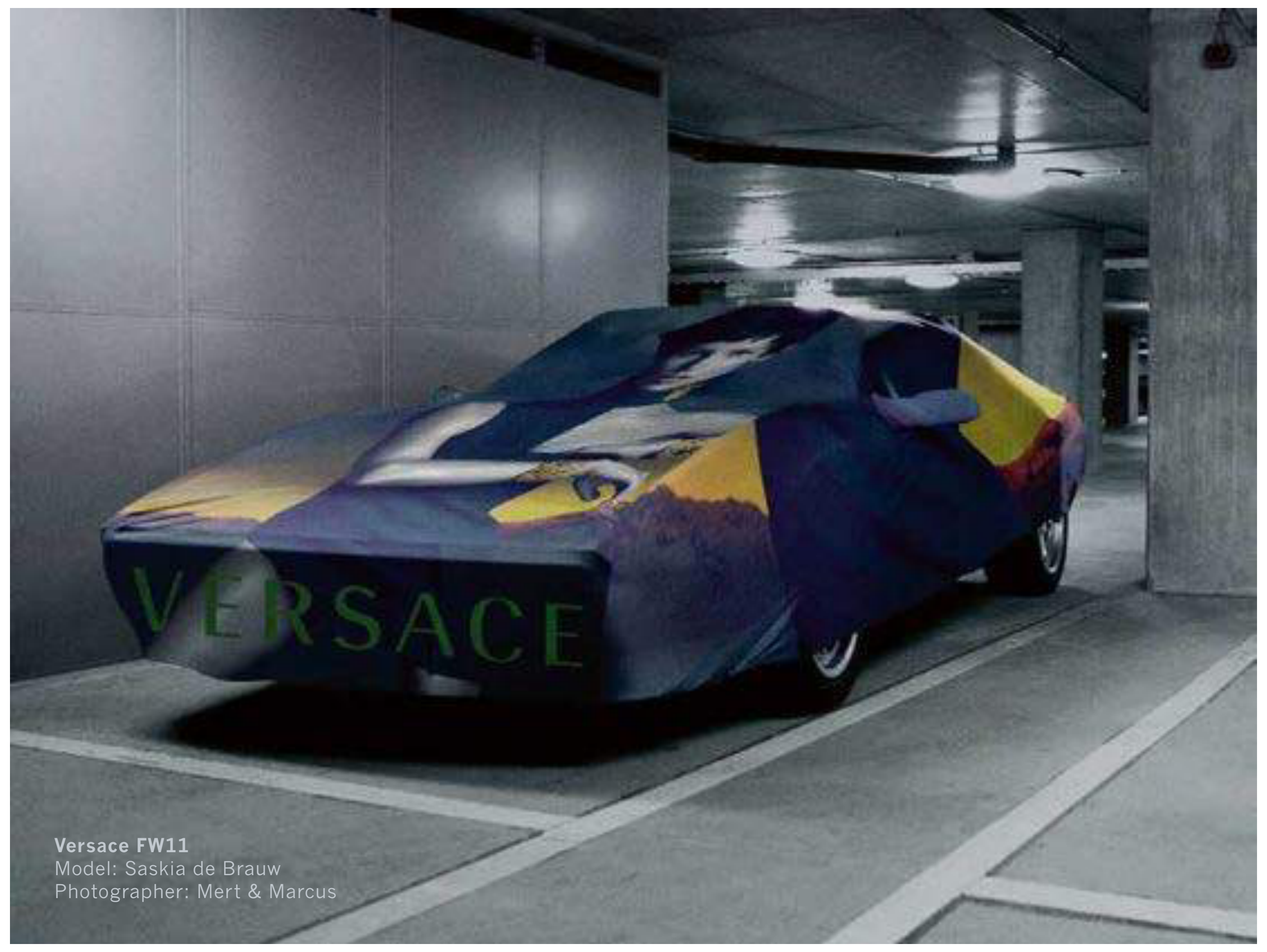
Miu Miu SS13
Model: Adriana Lima and Bette Franke
Photographer: Inez & Vinoodh

Dsquared2 FW10
Models: Alla Kostromichova, Chanel Iman,
Iris Strubegger, Jordan Coulter,
Thomas Hoefnagels, Tyler Kenyon
Photographer: Mert & Marcus

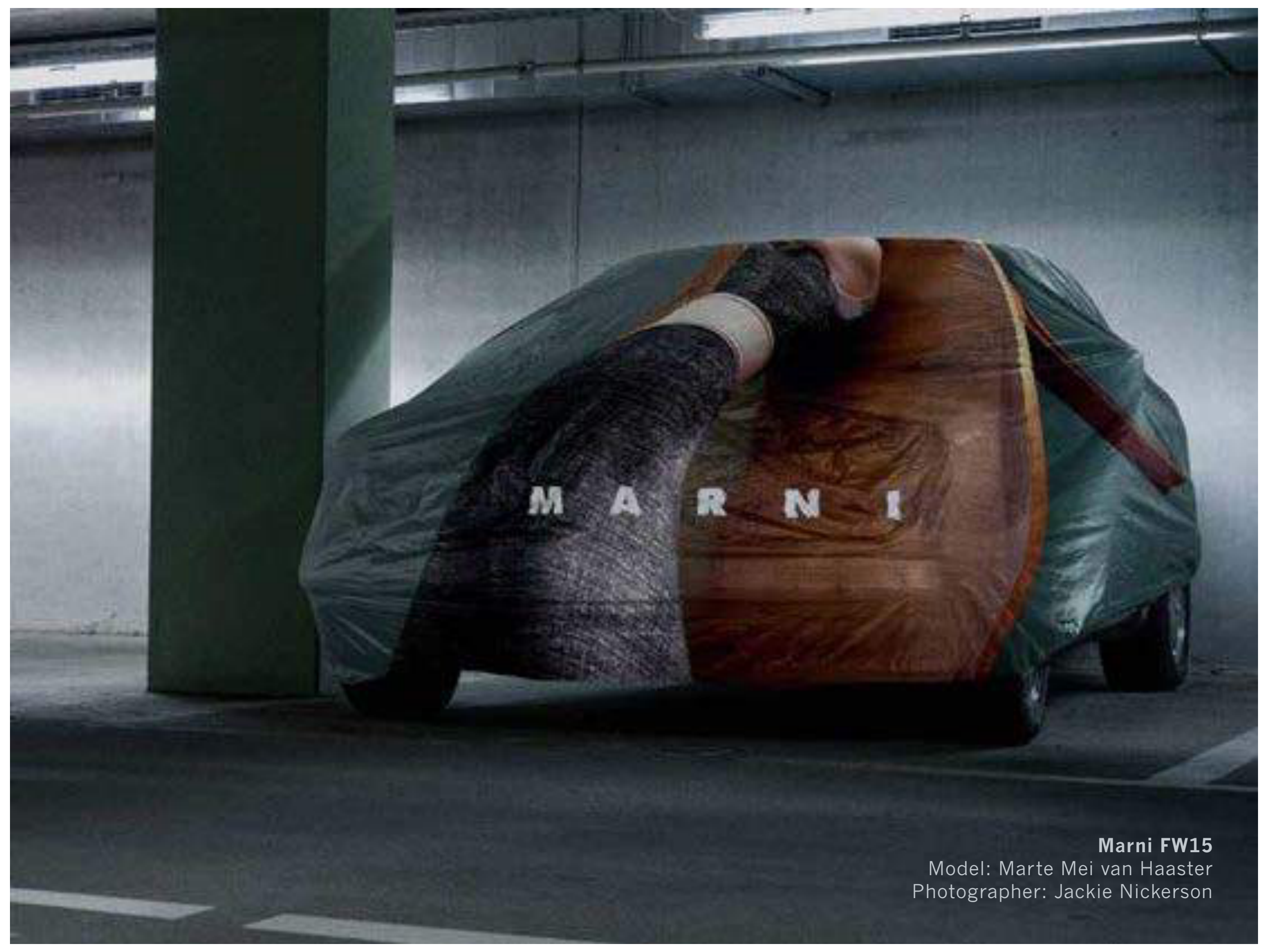
Fergie, Double Dutchess, 2017
Model: Fergie
Photographer: Mert & Marcus


CHER
EAU DE
CHER

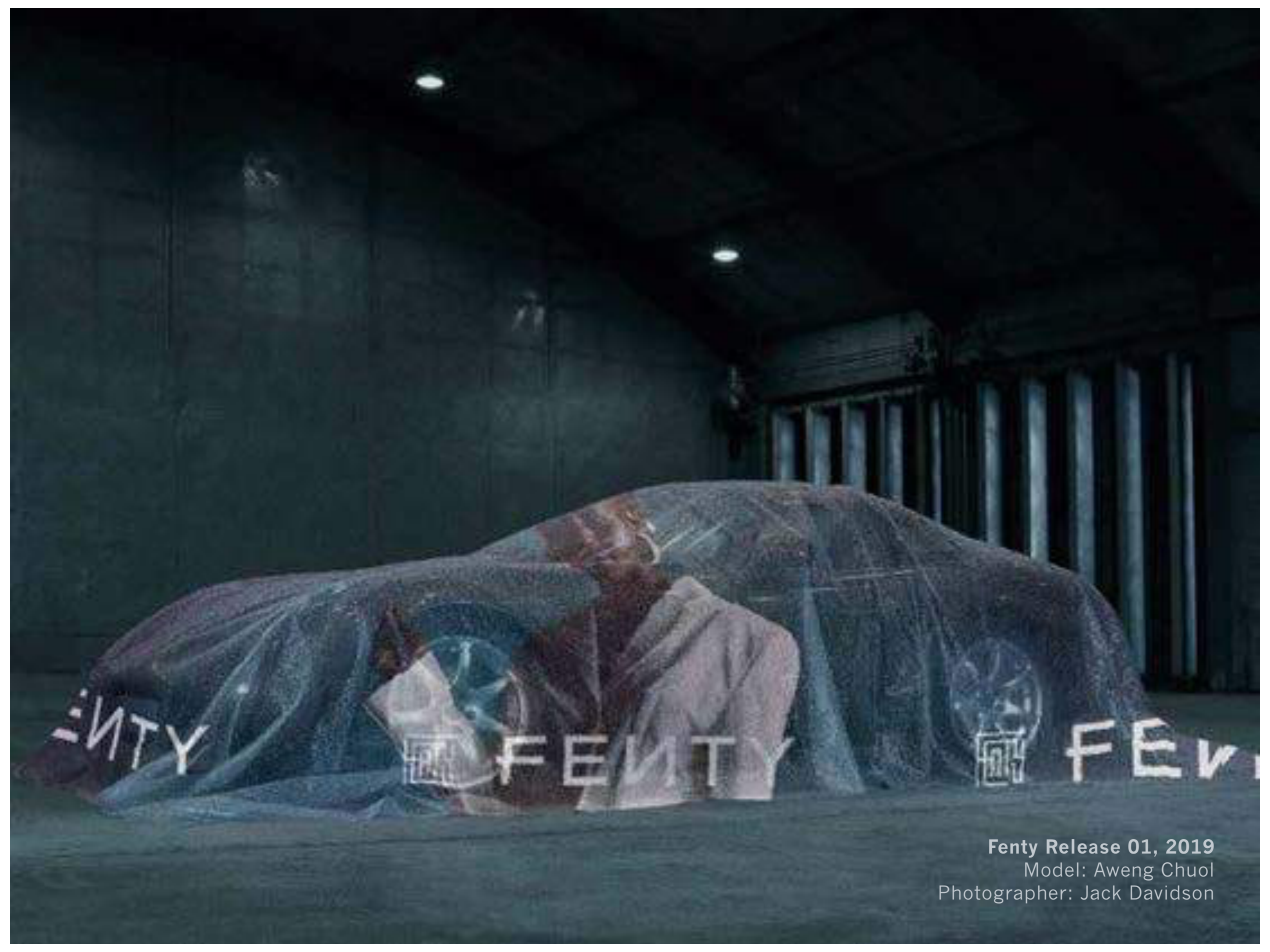
Cher Fragrance 2020
Model: Cher
Photographer: Mert & Marcus



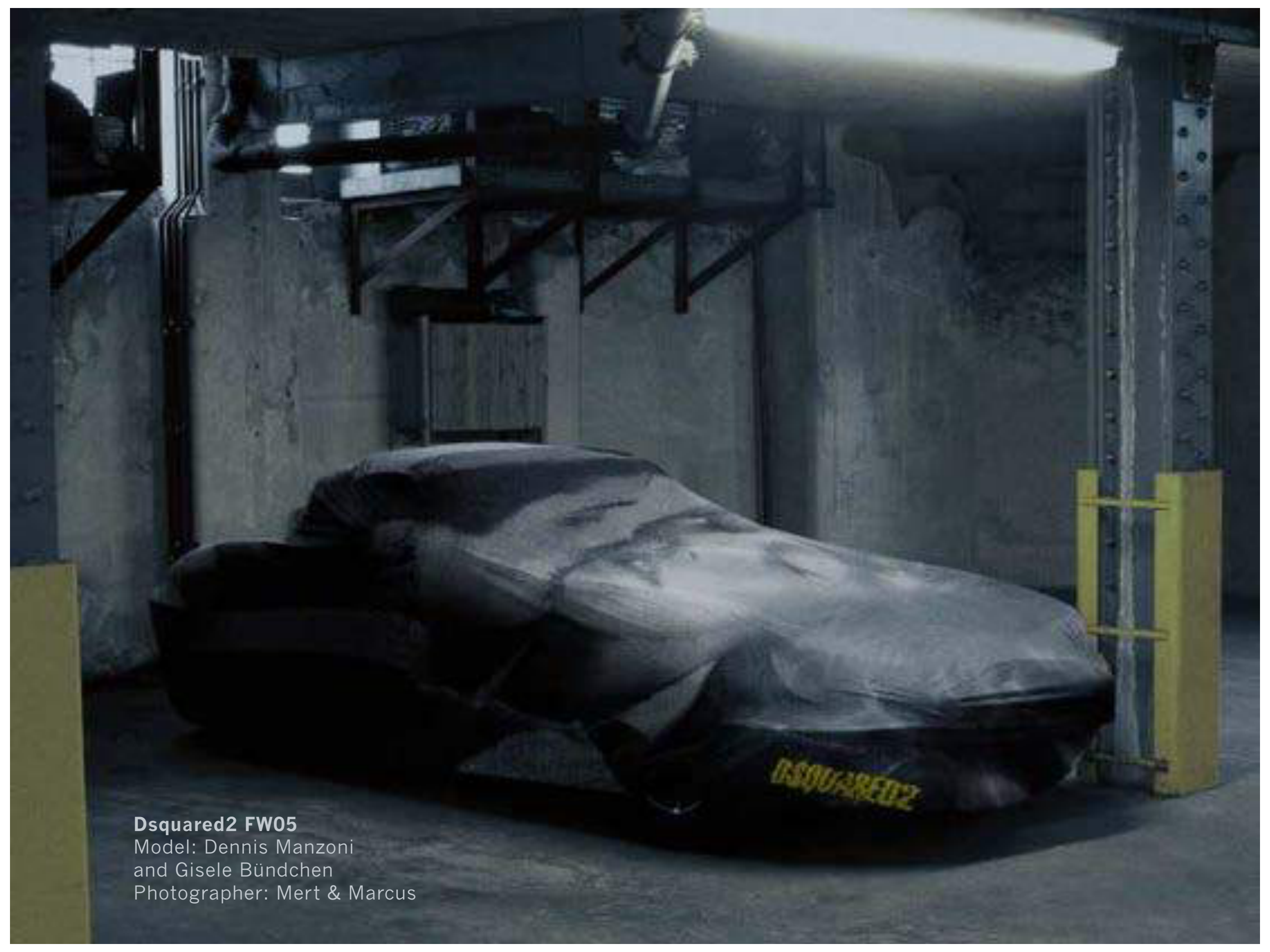
Versace FW11
Model: Saskia de Brauw
Photographer: Mert & Marcus



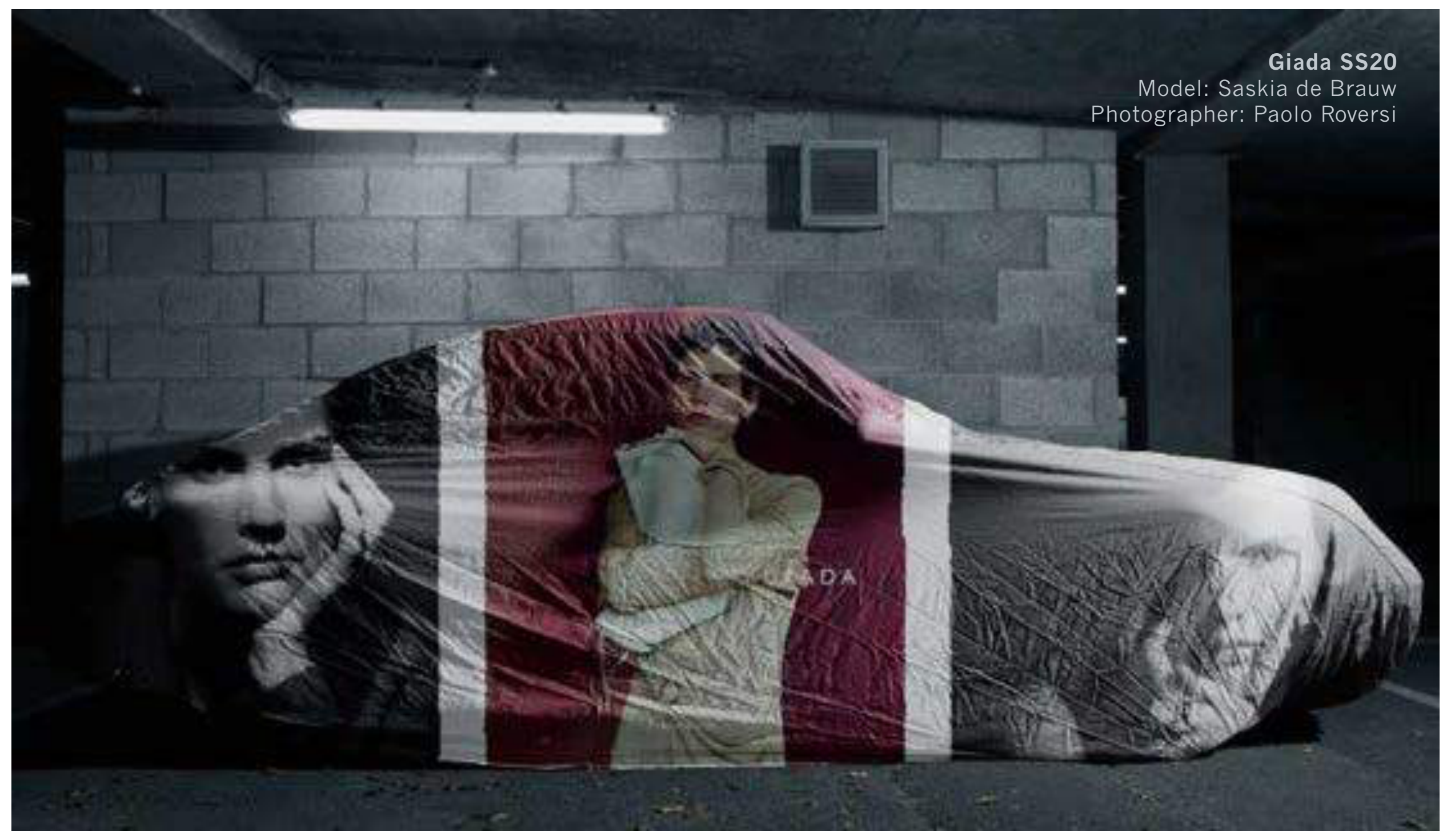
Marni FW15
Model: Marte Mei van Haaster
Photographer: Jackie Nickerson


FENTY
FENTY
FEN

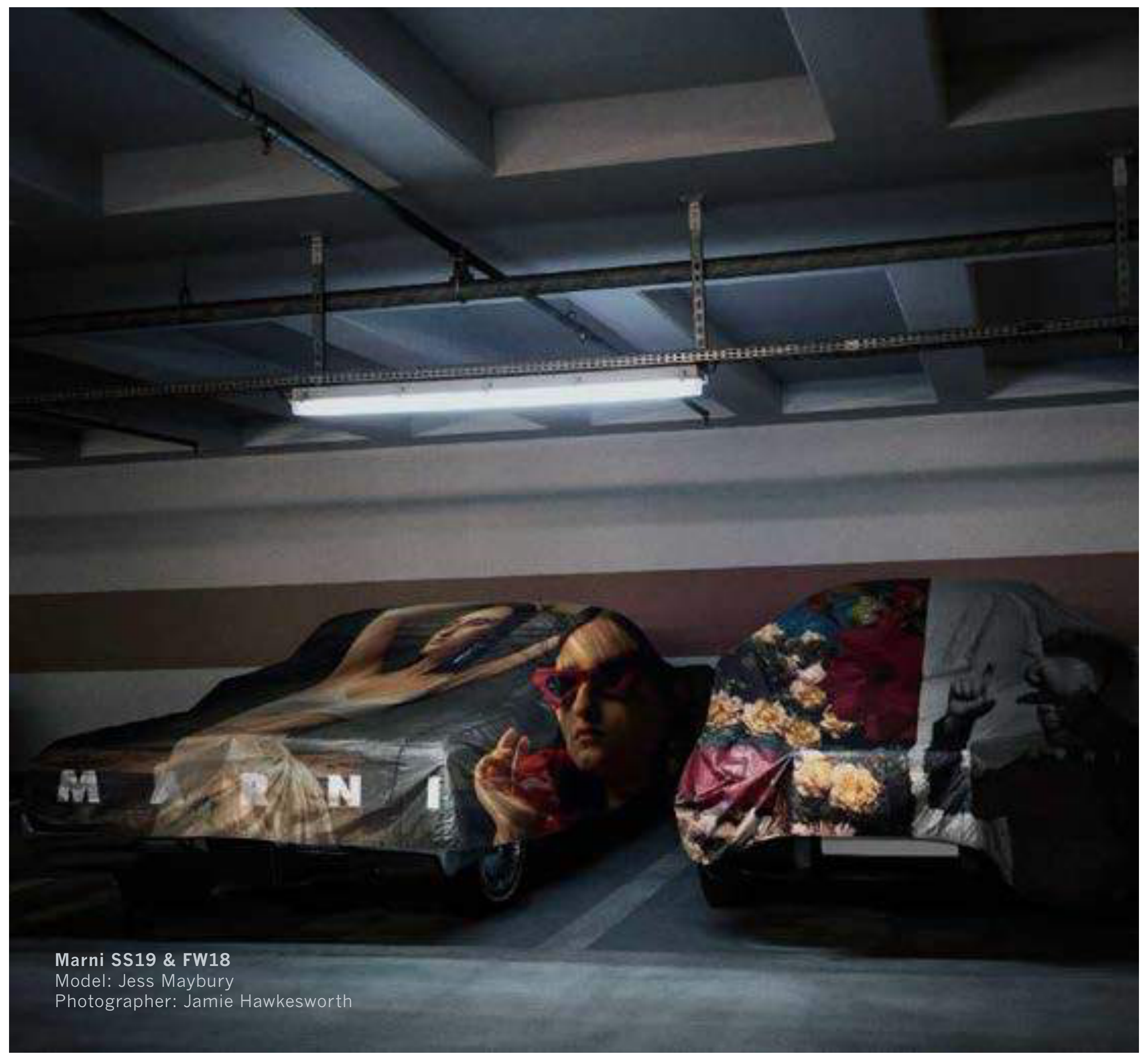
Fenty Release 01, 2019
Model: Aweng Chuol
Photographer: Jack Davidson



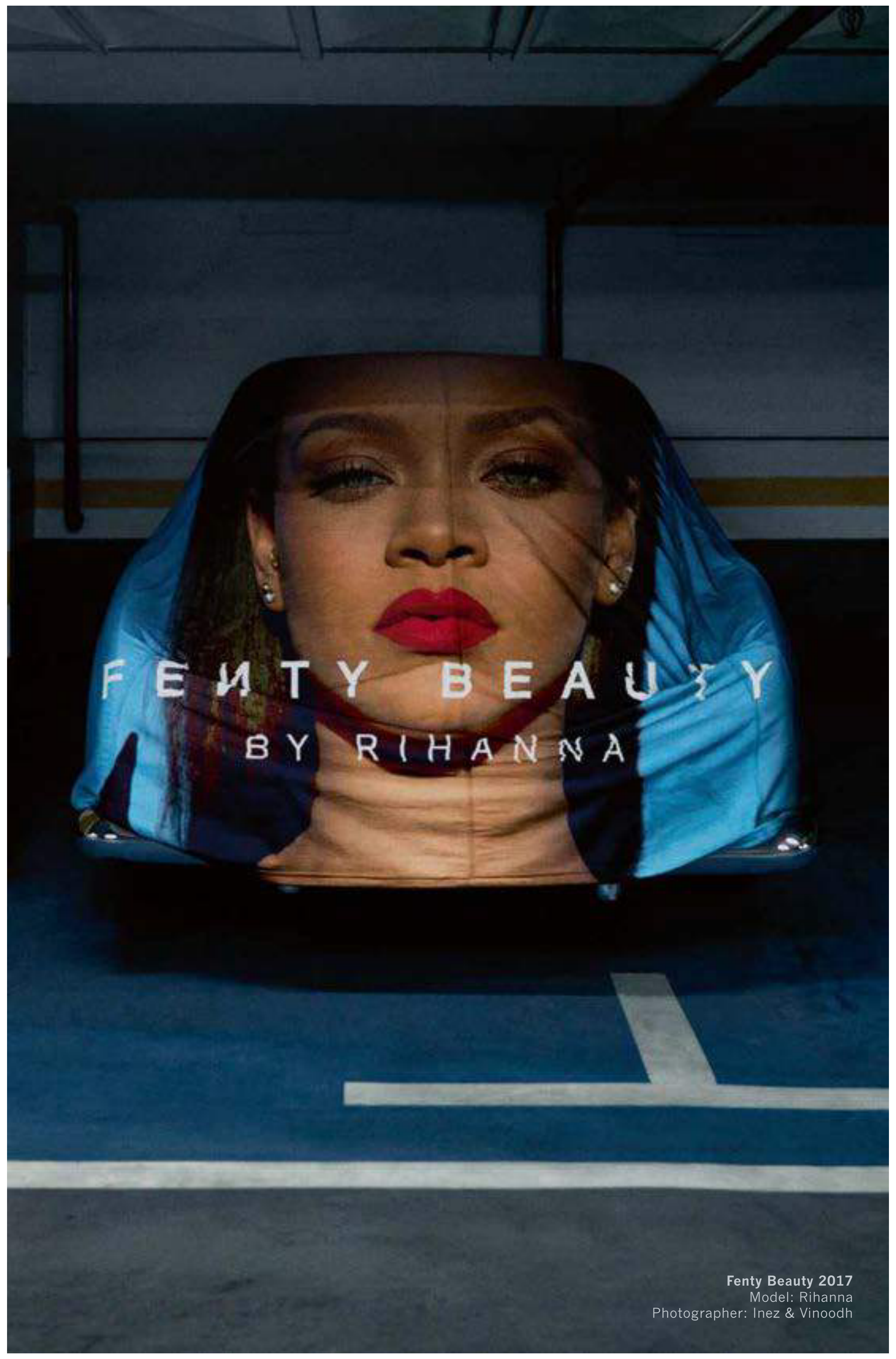
Dsquared2 FW05
Model: Dennis Manzoni
and Gisele Bündchen
Photographer: Mert & Marcus



Giada SS20
Model: Saskia de Brauw
Photographer: Paolo Roversi



Marni SS19 & FW18
Model: Jess Maybury
Photographer: Jamie Hawkesworth


FENTY BEAUTY
BY RIHANNA

Fenty Beauty 2017
Model: Rihanna
Photographer: Inez & Vinoodh

‘I love democracy – but I miss quality.’

A conversation with
Giovanni Bianco, 8 May 2020.

Thomas Lenthal: Tell me about your portfolio. I was really impressed with the production value of it; I have no idea how you pulled that off. Who took the pictures at night, and where are they?

Giovanni Bianco: When you asked me to do something, I didn’t know what I was going to do. I’m not a photographer; I hate taking photos. If you saw my pictures in my iPhone, you’d cry. But I’m a very good research guy. So I took the easy option! I made all the image references about parking; I’m fascinated by parking. When I was young, my dad sold fruit, and I worked with him for 14 years, selling fruit in the street while going to school. We lived in this beautiful, but modest house in Santa Teresa, a neighbourhood of Rio de Janeiro, and we had a parking space, which my dad rented from other people in the area. He had this little space for parking his car. All my life, I’ve been fascinated by parking. I’m not crazy about cars; I don’t drive anymore. Cars are not my passion, but I really love parking. I worked with Steven Klein for many years and he loved parking, too. I thought: everything that is happening in my life right now is parked: my work is parked; my life is parked. Everything is parked. So I thought I would select some jobs and clients that I really like and park them with me. When I started as an art director, I was in packaging design, and I loved the idea of packaging. Before the idea of packaging the cars, I had the idea of creating a supermarket. I thought, ‘I’ll buy supermarket packaging and I’ll put on labels with my clients.’ That was too complicated, so I thought instead about parking cars, and when my guys did the first image in Photoshop, I loved it. I hope you like it, because it’s a weird idea.

‘When I was 21, fashion was something I was completely uninterested in. I didn’t know the difference between Armani and Versace.’

Thomas: Yes, but I love the notion of you dressing the cars, because those big pieces of cloth are like dresses.

Giovanni: Yes, it’s a dress. Because when you don’t use the car, you protect it.

Thomas: Here’s the first question: do you think restriction is useful or necessary when it comes to creative work?

Giovanni: All my life, my whole career, I’ve worked with restriction – it’s a good challenge. The photographer I’ve collaborated with most is Steven Klein. He is the most challenging man in the world. He’s very hard. He’s an intense guy; he challenges you all the time. When I started to collaborate with him, he pushed me to do different types of research. It was always painful, never easy. I started out with the idea that everything that is complicated is good; you need hard work, and I believe in hard work. I work with a lot of passion, and it’s a challenge all the time, so I think restriction is normal. I’ve worked with Madonna for 16 years, and she’s the most demanding woman in the world. She’ll look at what you’ve done and say, ‘Do you like that?’ And you’ll say, I like it, of course, and she’ll say, ‘Make it better.’ That’s normal for me. Sometimes, if a client loves the work from the beginning, it makes me doubt what I’ve done. I think, ‘Oh, that’s too easy.’

Thomas: You talk about the hardship of doing things. That’s interesting, because none of the other art directors addressed the issue of it sometimes being painful.

Giovanni: For me, it being painful is part of the process. It makes you grow. I am learning something all the time. Of course, it’s better, it’s nicer if you’re doing something easier. But I like the idea of working hard and challenging yourself: I want it to make it better. That’s been the same all my life. Nothing in my life has been easy: I don’t come from a rich family; I have a million problems; I have dyslexia; I come from another country. It’s different for me. My career is not easy.

Thomas: It’s fighting, fighting.

Giovanni: I have to fight for everything. I’m not part of the mafia. I’m on the outside. I’m not part of any gang. It’s a unique way of working. All my career I’ve had to fight for everything. It’s normal for me.

Thomas: That’s super interesting. Looking back, was there a defining image, reference, person or moment from your teenage years that made you want to be in fashion, be a creative director?

Giovanni: That is so funny, because when I arrived in Milan I hated fashion. In Brazil, I had studied engineering at university and thought that would be my life. But I loved painting. At the beginning of my career, I started doing graphic design for galleries, for furniture designs, for logos, for packaging; fashion was something I was completely uninterested in. When I was 21, I didn’t know the difference between Armani and Versace. For me, it was all the same. It’s so weird, I never once thought about working in fashion, even for a day. I really wanted to work in the arts; I’m a frustrated painter. I love furniture design. I love working with type, logos, packaging. I thought, ‘What’s fashion? It’s just clothes.’ One day, when I was in Milan, I met Domenico and Stefano, and they invited me to work for Dolce & Gabbana. That was my first job in fashion. When I discovered this world, I thought it was amazing. I loved the photos; I loved the research. And then I discovered Fabien Baron: he is my hero. I started working with him, and I discovered Italian *Vogue*, and I was fascinated. Over one or two years, I looked at all the fashion magazines, designers and all fashion photographers. I was fascinated because it was so new for me. I started to look at CD covers, too, at advertising for Calvin Klein, and I thought, ‘Wow, this is my business.’ That was my beginning.

Thomas: How old were you when the Dolce Gabbana thing happened?

Giovanni: I was 27. It was late. I met Stefano and Domenico in Milan, at a party. We started talking, they asked me what I was doing, I said I was a graphic designer and they said they needed someone for D&G, the second line. They asked if I was interested. I said yes, but I’d never worked in fashion, and they said, ‘You’re the perfect guy. We want someone who doesn’t work in fashion for this job.’ I did the first catalogue for D&G, the first advertising.

Thomas: Who was the photographer?

Giovanni: Paolo Leone. He’s a friend of Domenico’s, a Sicilian guy. I remember he did the first advertising with Stella Tennant. That was my beginning. All my references are Fabien: I looked at him, and thought, ‘I want to be him.’

Thomas: Was Fabien the person you most admired in the fashion industry?

Giovanni: Yes, but I didn’t know any others! Afterwards, I discovered Marc Ascoli and many others.

Thomas: What about today? Who is your hero in the fashion industry?

Giovanni: I still think Fabien is one of the best. I think the digital world has changed a lot, but I think our generation is still doing the most classic and beautiful work: you, Marc Ascoli, David James. We have so many good people in this business. But Fabien Baron is still doing classic, elegant work, and good ideas come from the classic. The digital world has changed things a lot. There are young guys doing such nice work, but I can’t think of one idea that stands out.

‘Who cares about realism? Our job is to make dreams, fantasy. That’s why I love to work with Steven Klein; he’s a master of fantasy.’

Thomas: What’s most intuitive in your work and what is stuff that you tend to overthink?

Giovanni: My best skill is research. I have 9,000 books; I collect books. I have an incredible collection of images. If you talk with the photographers that I work with – Inez [van Lamsweerde], Steven, Marcus [Piggott] – they’ll tell you the same: my most powerful thing is research. I’m very good at it. I think my weakness and where I could do better is typography. I care so much about ideas and concepts. Sometimes when I’m doing typography I feel that I’m old-fashioned.

Thomas: What makes a good fashion image?

Giovanni: When you have a good team, good clothes, good hair, good make-up, a good environment, a good idea, a good model, and *quality*. What’s happening today with images: it’s fresh, it’s nice, but I miss the quality. It’s so fast today; everyone can do everything on their fucking mobile, everybody’s a photographer. It’s amazing – I love democracy – but I miss quality. I miss looking at a picture and thinking, ‘Look at that light! Look at the quality of the light, the make-up, the clothes.’ With Joe McKenna, you see the quality of the clothes; you don’t need to Photoshop the clothes. I’m so happy that I started out 30 years ago and worked with people who have a real eye for quality. When they do photos, you don’t need to use Photoshop to repair anything. Today, you get so lazy because you know you can do it in Photoshop. When you work with a good team, everything is amazing.

Thomas: So the quality of the ingredients is what makes a great fashion image.

Giovanni: Yes: quality people and a quality idea. You need an idea. One of the reasons I lost interest in doing magazines is because every month you needed to do three or four editorials, and it’s impossible; after three years, it’s impossible to have a good idea every month. You need 3 million years every week, because the next week you’re doing another magazine. That’s hard for me. I’m old-school. I don’t believe young photographers develop their own language in a year. Some people started yesterday, and now they are a big star; I don’t believe it. For you to have direction in your trade you need to take at least 10 years, to develop your own language.

Thomas: Tell me – as you're talking about stuff that's difficult – have you had a fashion disappointment and what did you learn from it?

Giovanni: It's the deadlines. Today, everything is for tomorrow, and you don't have time. It's sad. Most of the time the clients want quantity, not quality. They don't care about quality ideas. The most important thing you are doing is delivering. It's a supermarket. This is a disappointment. I still believe in quality and the idea and that one good image is more important than 20 stupid images.

Thomas: So you're disappointed with the current state of the industry?

Giovanni: Yes. When I look at advertising or editorial, I don't know what brand they are for any more. Sometimes, I put my hand over the logo and I can't tell which brand I'm looking at. For me, there is no longer any distinction between them, between what is luxury, what is not. I don't know any more. I think brands have lost their DNA. Everything is so fast: there's so much quantity, there are pre-collections, fall, winter, summer. So many.

Thomas: Do you think that the sheer amount has created confusion and is reducing quality?

Giovanni: No one can have that many good ideas. It's ridiculous. I remember doing six images for one advert, and now you need to do 30 in one day. How can you create good images when you have to do 30? It's a catalogue.

'I remember doing six images for one advert, and now you need to do 30 in a day. How can you create good images like this? It's a catalogue.'

Thomas: We were lucky to work back in the late 20th century, when we had a lot of time to create.

Giovanni: Today, when I work, I respect the time frame, I respect the budget, and I will adapt for the client. No problem. But if you ask me what I *believe*, that's something else. I believe in quality, but I need to work, so I adapt. If the client wants 30 images in one day, I do 30 images in one day. But it's so hard to have quality like that. It's impossible.

Thomas: It's very difficult. If you're doing 30 images a day for advertising, you don't have time to...

Giovanni: Reflect! And now you need to do picture and video together. How can you do that? You do it, but you can forget about quality. But I need to work, and I respect my clients and they don't have much budget, so they need that. If you don't do it, some young people will do 30 images and a video in a day for $5,000. And people will say, 'Bye-bye, old man.'

Thomas: Do you prefer to work for a very niche audience, or to appeal to a wider audience?

Giovanni: A wider one, of course. If I have to work for 10 people, I'll work for 10 people, and the work will be more personal. What gives me the most pleasure, though, is working for a brand. I love a challenge, and a big brand is a great challenge. You need to talk to everybody, not just the elite. A small audience is easier; the challenge for me is talking to different people, different countries. You need to sell to every different kind of mind; it's amazing. Your challenge is to make something universal.

Thomas: And when you have to please someone like Steven Klein, it's as difficult as pleasing 10 million people sometimes, isn't it?

Giovanni: I love working with Steven Klein, because he is a genius, one of the greatest photographers in the world. I love working with geniuses; I don't care if it's harder, because a good job *is* hard. If you work with a genius you know you're going to produce something good. I look back at the work I did with Steven, and I still think it is some of the best I've done. That, for me, is a pleasure. Steven is a genius. Same with Steven Meisel. Some photographers you work with, you never forget the the resulting image, because of the quality. It doesn't matter that it was harder. For me, it's a pleasure.

Thomas: Tell me something about what is happening right now. When all this goes back to normality, do you think you will be more interested in fantasy or realism?

Giovanni: I really don't care about realism any more; I hope it will be fantasy. People need to dream. I want to dream. Realism is a nightmare: oh my God, it's so boring. Who cares about realism? Our job is to make dreams, fantasy. That's why I love to work with Steven Klein; he's a master of fantasy. You create history; you challenge yourself. It's not something you're going to forget the next day. Every day I talk with him; I miss working with him.

Thomas: Tell me about him, because you seem enthralled by him. What do you appreciate? The narrative?

Giovanni: The narrative, but also that he drives you crazy. He makes you challenge yourself more and more and more. He loves fantasy. I like that. I love working with Mert and Marcus, with Inez and Vinoodh; I like working with different photographers in different ways. But Steven challenged me so much, that's what I appreciate with him. Every time I work with him, I grow. I'm so tired afterwards, but I'm so happy when I see the result and I know it's good.

Thomas: When this whole episode of confinement is over, is there something that will change in your way of looking and doing things?

Giovanni: Things are going to change a lot, because we need to change our way of communicating. The approach that we have with clients, with the audience, is going to be completely different. In Brazil at the moment, if you talk to people about sales, or the brand, people are in shock, because there are more urgent things to talk about, like food, people dying. People need to communicate more about human beings, saving lives, social things like that. Of course, every culture is different, and with each client it's going to be different. I hope that this generic thing is going to end. I must say that I've been really disappointed with brands in our business over the past few years. This break could offer everyone an opportunity to have more personality and quality at each brand, to create more of an identity again. Everything has become more generic.

'This break could offer every brand an opportunity to have more personality, to create more of an identity again. Everything's become too generic.'

Thomas: Do you think that's because everything became so huge? What happened?

Giovanni: Everything got so big. It's all the same. I really don't know, but my feeling is that when you look at something now it's really hard to understand which photographer shot the advertising, which one shot this editorial? Everything is too similar. Sometimes old photographers try to be young, and they're doing some trendy image and it's so confusing. We really need more personality. I remember when you would look at Yamamoto and know it was Yamamoto; when you'd see Comme des Garçons and know it was Comme des Garçons; see Prada and know it was Prada. Today, you just don't know – everything is too similar.

Thomas: You think the solution is to go back to being unique?

Giovanni: I think so. People need to create stronger identities, more personality and not be super generic. I hope so, or I'm going to do another job! I hope I can have clients who are interested in doing something interesting. It's going to be a good lesson for people, that they need to think a lot about responsibility, about what they're doing. We're not going back to the same thing. We have learned a lot. We have more respect; we have more social responsibility. I hope we come back as better human beings.

Thomas: How does that fit in with your idea that essentially we're in the business of making frivolity for people? That we want to make people escape and dream. Yet you are saying we need to be more socially aware, and so on. Aren't these two things...

Giovanni: It's different. In editorial life, I think we need more escape, more dreaming, more ideas. While each brand needs to respect its core identity. If you're not a dreamy brand, of course you shouldn't do that with your advertising. I hope that people respect their DNA more, their identity. Every brand has become more generic; people are afraid because they don't have good sales, so people are doing safer images. I feel that at all the brands, all the marketing is using the same formula. That's tired. I miss good ideas and good advertising, but I also believe in communicating with responsibility, because the world is going to change. But how can you know?

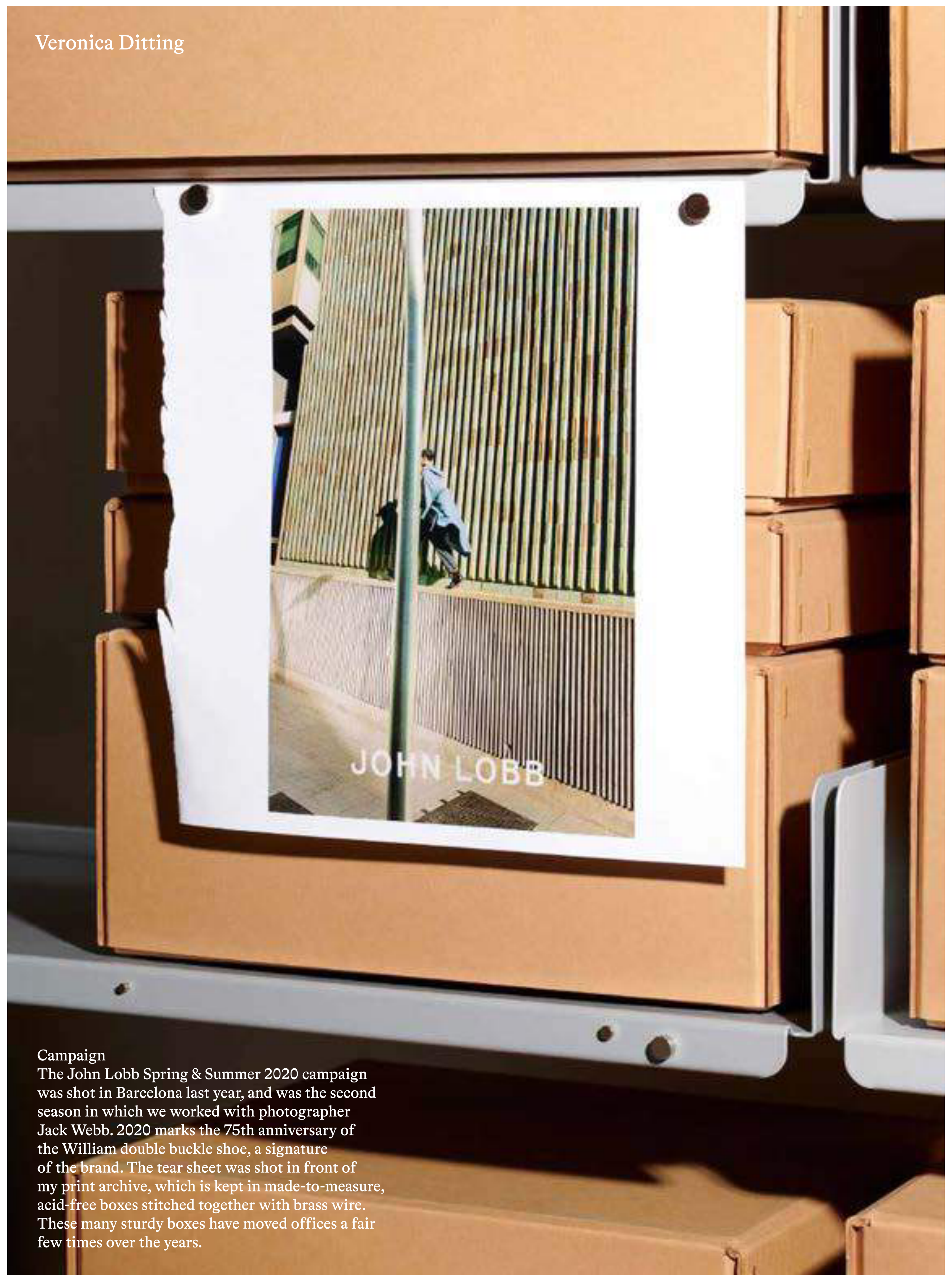
Thomas: Everyone has a different take. Everyone is projecting their own positivity or negativity.

Giovanni: I'm super positive that we're going back better. I'm Brazilian, and I have this idea that life can always get better. I believe in music and sound and colour. I believe that we have the opportunity to change and do better. That's why I believe in fantasy, because people need something more.

Curiosities

Essential office tools, work-in-progress, things I like, portfolio pieces – and some eclectic memorabilia, photographed at our Barbican office by Matthieu Lavanchy

Magic Tape
My team knows my extreme particularity when it comes to office supplies – the Tradio pen by Pentel, the notebook from Modulor, the galvanised staples by Leitz, and this so-called Scotch® Magic™ Tape by 3M. Magic Tape is matt, invisible and is easily removed from any type of surface. I use it endlessly. Not least in the sequence and rhythm of content, which is key for every publication – the sequencing can make or break a story. So, once the image edits are done – and because Magic Tape is easy to apply and easy to remove – I can rework the sequencing until it feels just so.

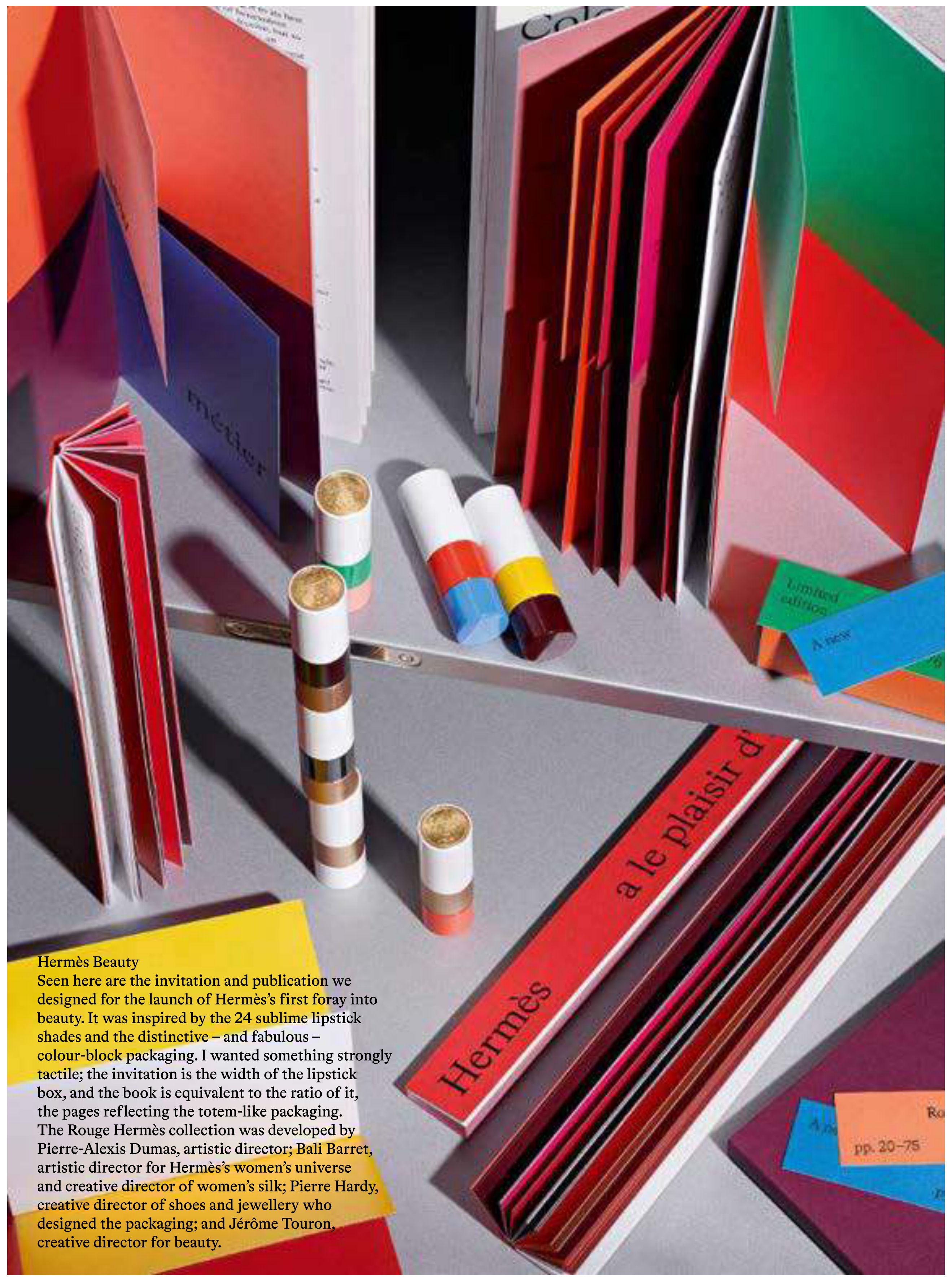


Campaign
The John Lobb Spring & Summer 2020 campaign was shot in Barcelona last year, and was the second season in which we worked with photographer Jack Webb. 2020 marks the 75th anniversary of the William double buckle shoe, a signature of the brand. The tear sheet was shot in front of my print archive, which is kept in made-to-measure, acid-free boxes stitched together with brass wire. These many sturdy boxes have moved offices a fair few times over the years.

Veronica Ditting

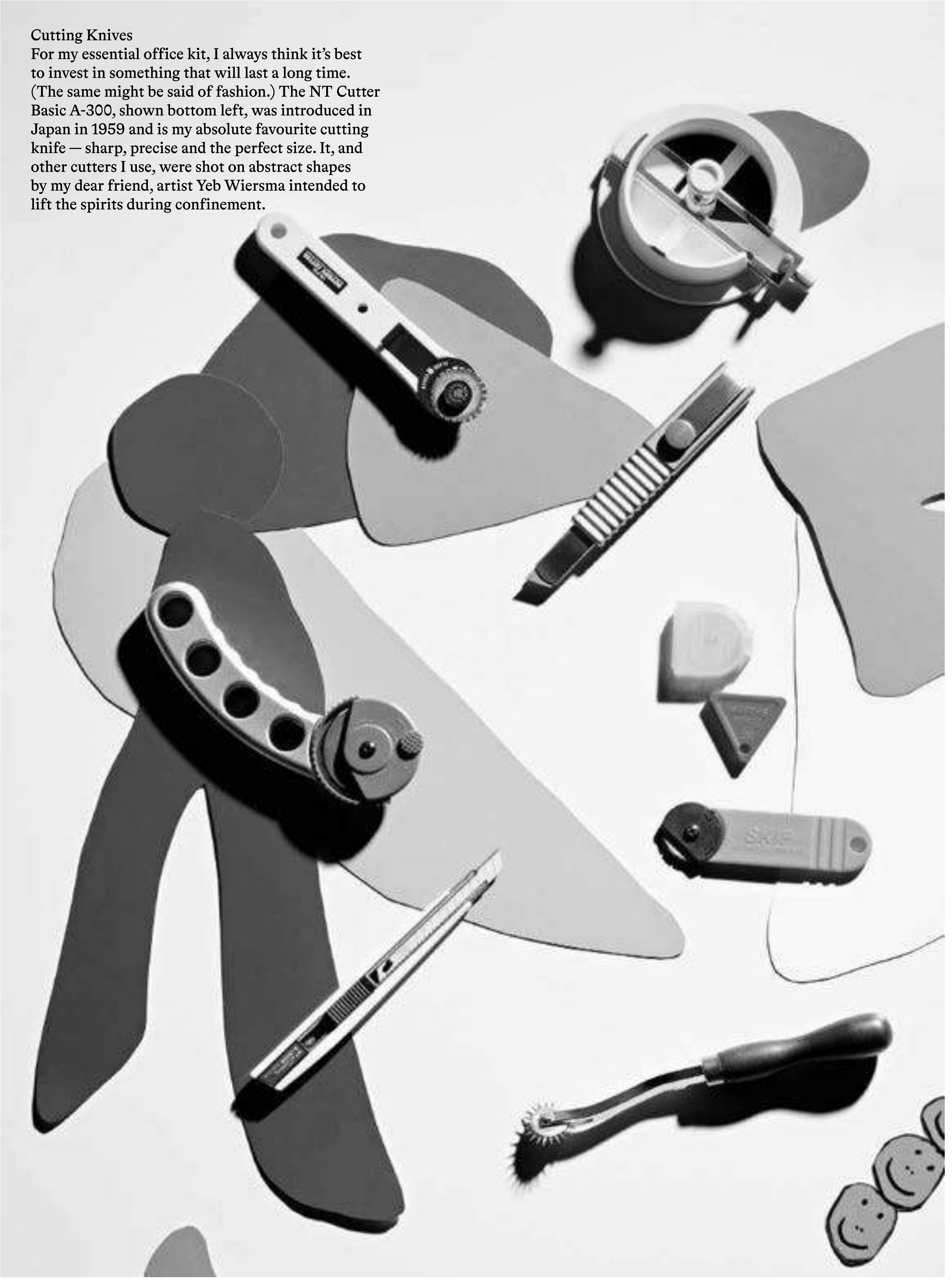
Polaroid
These are some of the Polaroids from a shoot with Oliver Hadlee Pearch and Emilie Kareh for The Gentlewoman. The story was based on prints and patterns and unexpected perspectives. The image above was shot on a terrace by the Thames. More than half of the magazine's shoots are done on film, nothing can match the spectrum of colour, tones and the grain.

Busy. The Gentlewoman, Issue No. 16, Autumn and Winter 2017. Models: Tessa Bruinsma, Milena Litvinovskaya, Milliana Maalim. Casting: Adam Hindle. Hair: Cyndia Harvey. Make-up: Thomas de Kluyver. Manicure: Ama Quashie. Set design: Suzanne Beirne. Production: Rosco Production

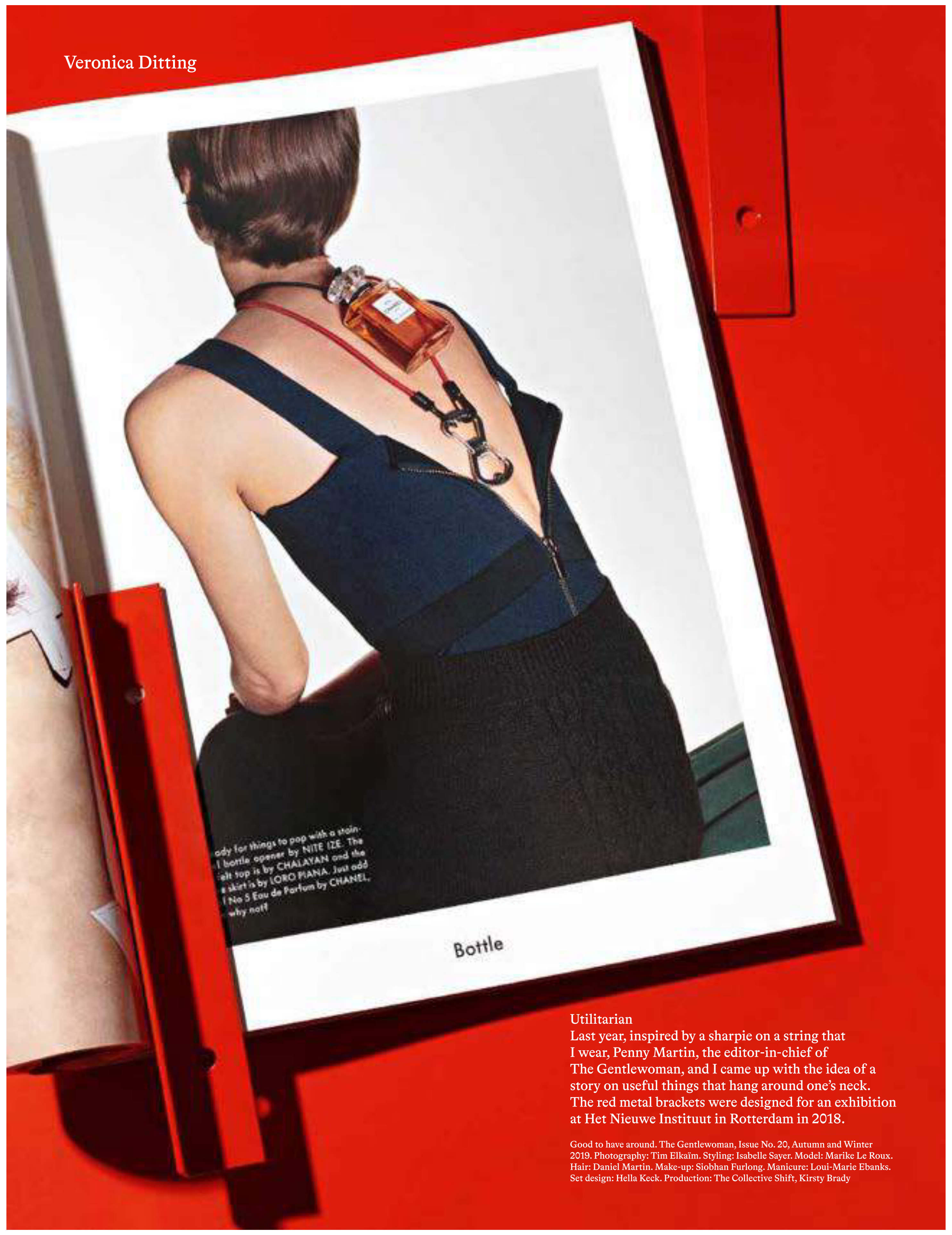


Hermès Beauty
Seen here are the invitation and publication we designed for the launch of Hermès's first foray into beauty. It was inspired by the 24 sublime lipstick shades and the distinctive – and fabulous – colour-block packaging. I wanted something strongly tactile; the invitation is the width of the lipstick box, and the book is equivalent to the ratio of it, the pages reflecting the totem-like packaging. The Rouge Hermès collection was developed by Pierre-Alexis Dumas, artistic director; Bali Barret, artistic director for Hermès's women's universe and creative director of women's silk; Pierre Hardy, creative director of shoes and jewellery who designed the packaging; and Jérôme Touron, creative director for beauty.

Cutting Knives
For my essential office kit, I always think it's best to invest in something that will last a long time. (The same might be said of fashion.) The NT Cutter Basic A-300, shown bottom left, was introduced in Japan in 1959 and is my absolute favourite cutting knife — sharp, precise and the perfect size. It, and other cutters I use, were shot on abstract shapes by my dear friend, artist Yeb Wiersma intended to lift the spirits during confinement.



Veronica Ditting


ady for things to pop with a stain-
l bottle opener by NITE IZE. The
elt top is by CHALAYAN and the
e skirt is by LORO PIANA. Just add
l No 5 Eau de Parfum by CHANEL,
why not?
Bottle

Utilitarian
Last year, inspired by a sharpie on a string that I wear, Penny Martin, the editor-in-chief of The Gentlewoman, and I came up with the idea of a story on useful things that hang around one's neck. The red metal brackets were designed for an exhibition at Het Nieuwe Instituut in Rotterdam in 2018.

Good to have around. The Gentlewoman, Issue No. 20, Autumn and Winter 2019. Photography: Tim Elkaïm. Styling: Isabelle Sayer. Model: Marike Le Roux. Hair: Daniel Martin. Make-up: Siobhan Furlong. Manicure: Loui-Marie Ebanks. Set design: Hella Keck. Production: The Collective Shift, Kirsty Brady

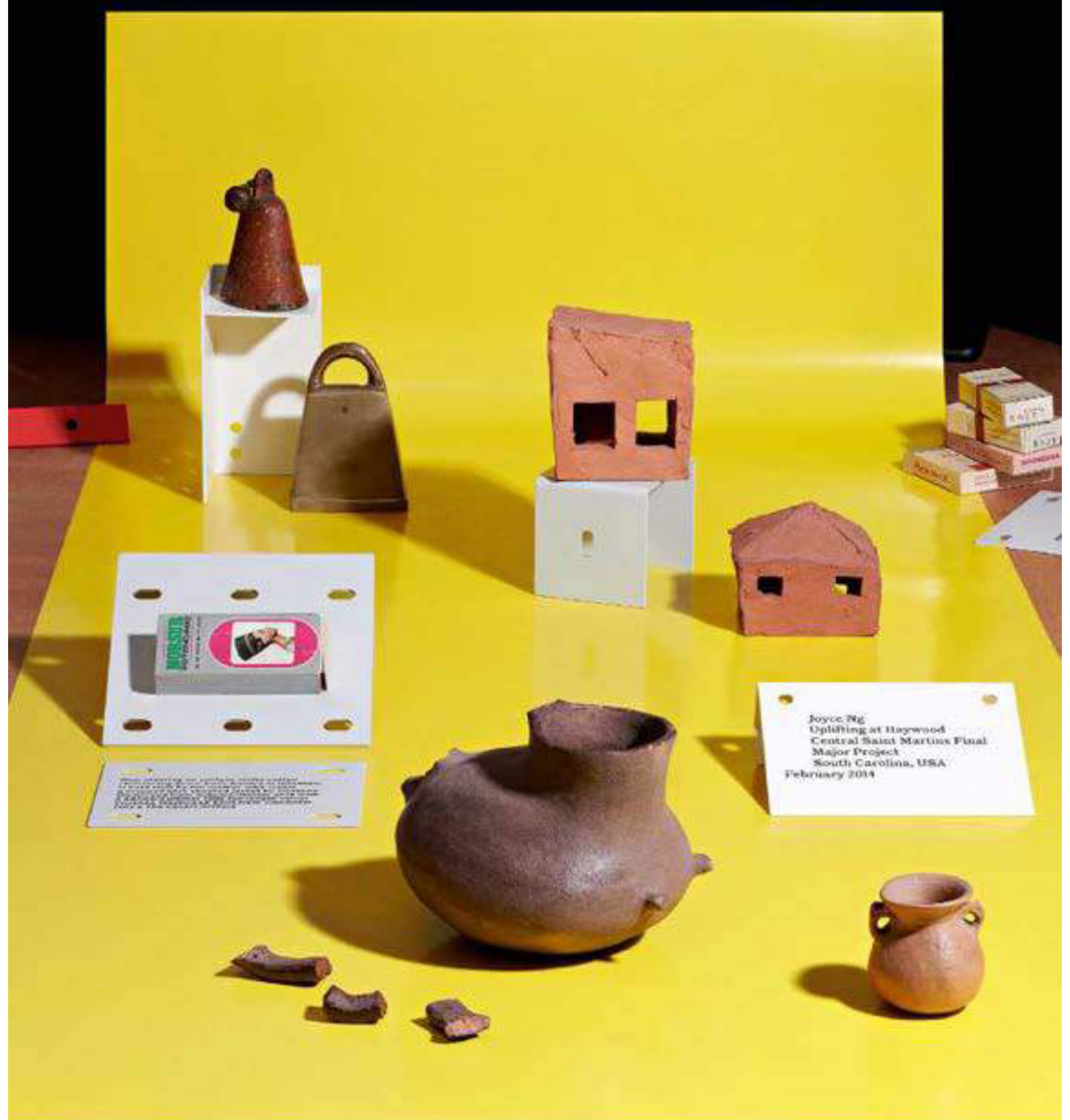
Veronica Ditting

Magnifying Loupe
When I started, I would press pass everything – be it a business card or a book; so much can be shaped on press. This magnifying loupe, the Betamag 12 ×, is without doubt one of the best, and is equipped with a colour-corrected, distortion-free lens ideal for checking dot gain. Over the years I have encountered every type of printing problem – including the breakdown of a multi-million-dollar press during the printing of a book for photographer Dana Lixenberg. I still love this technical aspect, but nowadays I spend more time on set than at the printer. The backdrop is a rasterised photograph by Mathilde Agius for the brand identity we developed for AT ID, a new company with a strong sustainability angle.

A-Z
Mini-Sammlung
Zitate
A-Z
Mini-Wörterbuch
Italienisch-Deutsch
Alan Sillitoe
Mimic
the gentlewoman
Margaret Atwood

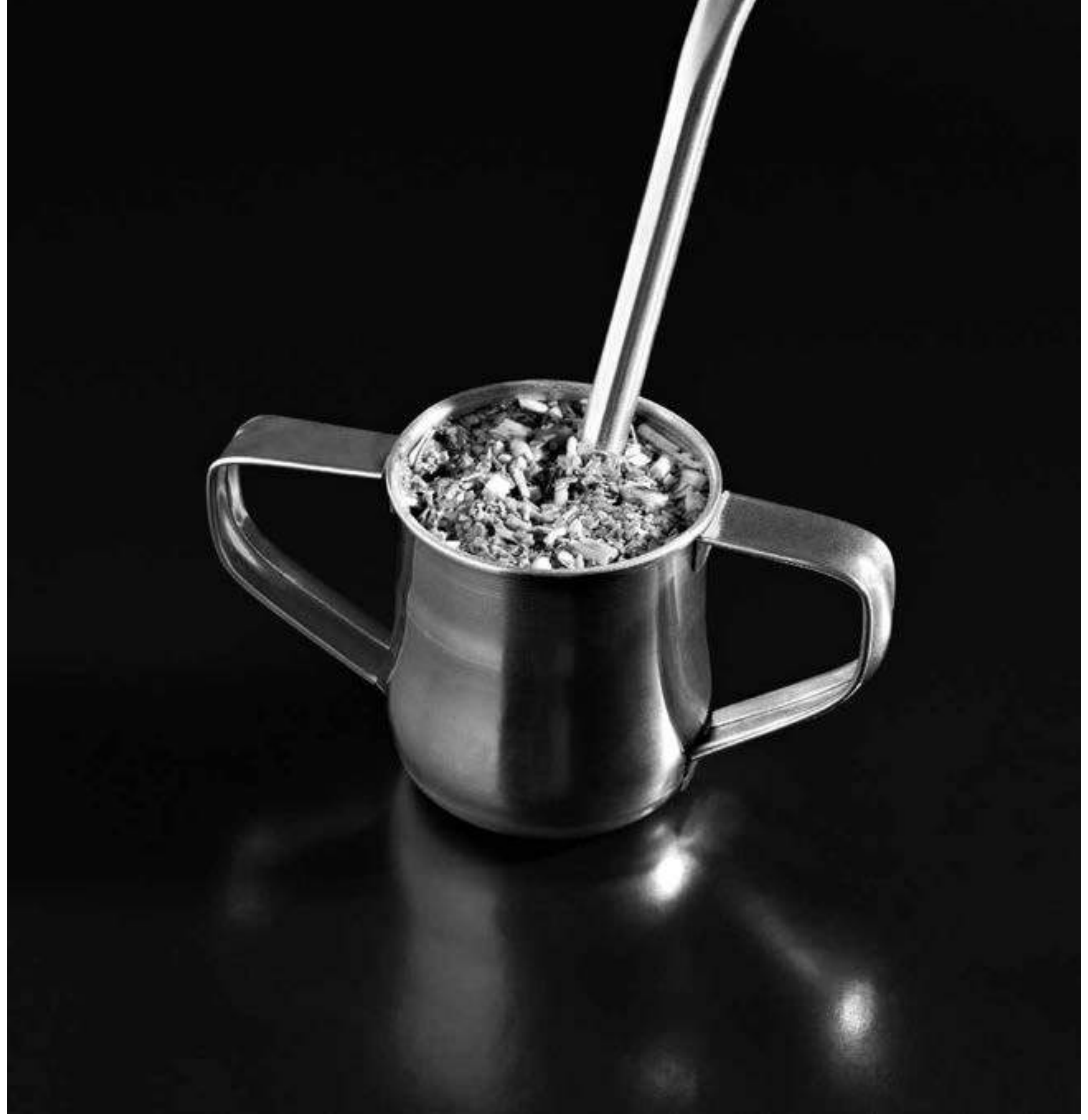
Miniature Collection
Growing up in Germany, my parents owned a stack of pocket-sized dictionaries. Italian—German, French—Spanish and more, which we would take on holidays. Over the years I have collected more miniature books, many of which are shown here. The oldest I own is Bryce's Thumb English Dictionary from the 1860s. To celebrate the first decade of The Gentlewoman in 2019, we took the opportunity to make a miniature issue of the magazine featuring cover profiles of the published issues. It measures 50 × 84mm small and contains 580 pages meticulously reworked for this mini edition.

Veronica Ditting

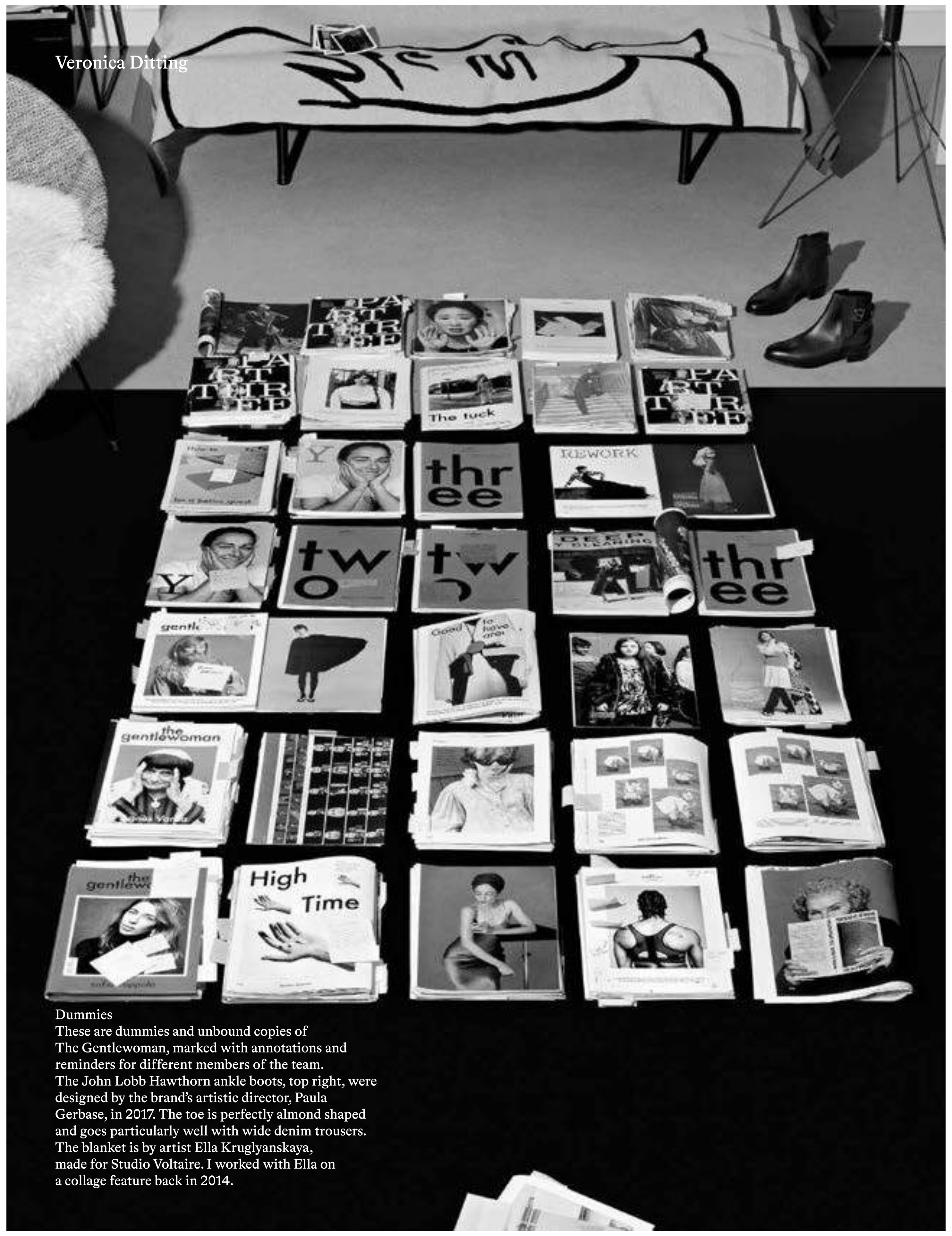

Joyce Ng
Uplifting at Haywood
Central Saint Martins Final
Major Project
South Carolina, USA
February 2014

Memorabilia
Some things I like: a 1950s jug from Jujuy, in the north-west of Argentina which I discovered in my grandmother's attic; medical packaging from the 1970s; scale models by a Japanese artist; two vintage bells. We designed the powder-coated caption panels and brackets for an exhibition by photographers Joyce Ng and Hanna Moon which took place at Somerset House in London in 2019.

Yerba Mate
Caffeine-rich infused mate tea is part of life and culture in Argentina, where I was born. It is made from the leaves of the Paraguayan holly, *Ilex paraguariensis*, and has many of the health benefits of green tea but doesn't make one jittery. You drink it through a *bombilla*, a metal straw, that has a flat end with small holes that function as a tea strainer. The yerba mate I prefer is by Suave Union, which I buy in bulk, and drink daily. It's certainly an acquired taste and on shoots I do get the occasional odd look when I fill up my little cup with what looks like sawdust.



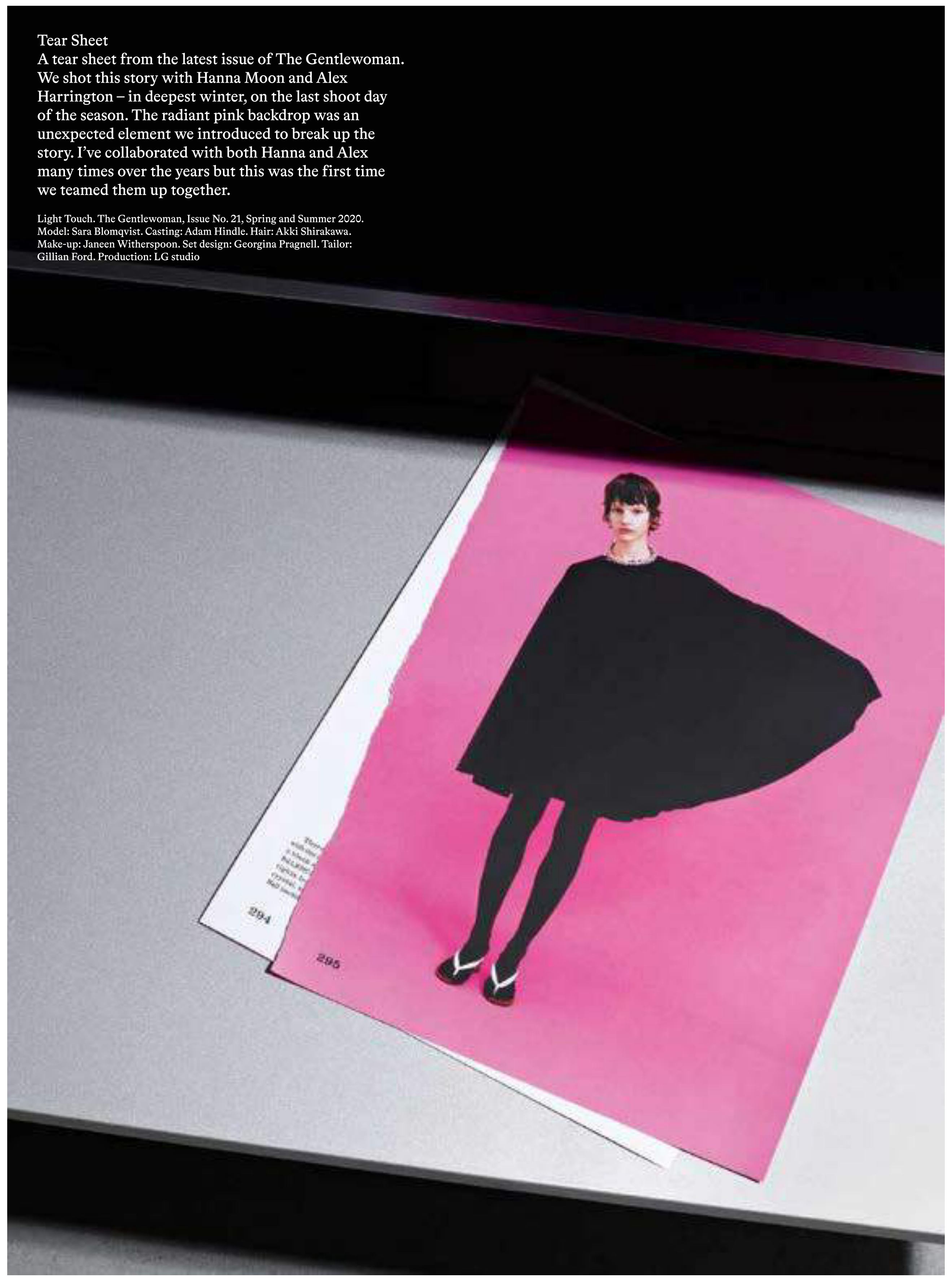
Veronica Ditting



Dummies
These are dummies and unbound copies of The Gentlewoman, marked with annotations and reminders for different members of the team. The John Lobb Hawthorn ankle boots, top right, were designed by the brand's artistic director, Paula Gerbase, in 2017. The toe is perfectly almond shaped and goes particularly well with wide denim trousers. The blanket is by artist Ella Kruglyanskaya, made for Studio Voltaire. I worked with Ella on a collage feature back in 2014.

Tear Sheet
A tear sheet from the latest issue of The Gentlewoman. We shot this story with Hanna Moon and Alex Harrington – in deepest winter, on the last shoot day of the season. The radiant pink backdrop was an unexpected element we introduced to break up the story. I've collaborated with both Hanna and Alex many times over the years but this was the first time we teamed them up together.

Light Touch. The Gentlewoman, Issue No. 21, Spring and Summer 2020. Model: Sara Blomqvist. Casting: Adam Hindle. Hair: Akki Shirakawa. Make-up: Janeen Witherspoon. Set design: Georgina Pragnell. Tailor: Gillian Ford. Production: LG studio



Veronica Ditting

Seat Occupied
dusty
VERO

Blue
Blue is simply my favourite colour, both in design and for my wardrobe. And I love printed matter. Random things – a hang-tag, a sick bag, the label from a net of oranges (with my nickname on it) – get thrown together in inspiration boxes. Time capsules all. In the bottom left corner is a tear sheet from a book by Barbara Visser, a Dutch artist and friend with whom I’ve collaborated often. I use the matt and shiny tapes for sketches, packaging and set design.

Lava stone Ring
I bought this ring in an antique shop in Noto in Southern Sicily, where my friend Louise and I were on holiday last August. The moon face is made from lava stone, extracted from Mount Etna. It’s too big for me and I’m impatient to have it fitted to size as soon as such things become possible again.

Thanks to my studio team.

‘So much of a project’s success is about the conversations you have with the people involved.’

A conversation with
Veronica Ditting, 14 May 2020.

Thomas: Thank you for all your hard work. Your portfolio is a wonderful addition. Would you like to talk me through it?

Veronica: When you got in touch, I thought, ‘How can I participate in a way that isn’t just pulling up archive work and putting it on the page?’ Funnily enough, before the lockdown hit, we were in the midst of a huge spring clean of the studio. It’s something I’d never gotten around to doing since we moved to this particular studio in the Barbican, because we’ve been incredibly busy and there is no time to stand still. For the portfolio, I thought it would be nice to give a little peek into my world and my approach, but rather than just showing work we’ve done, I wanted to make it like a diary-tool-book-portfolio. I thought I could try and shoot it myself, but wasn’t sure about my technical capabilities, so I called my neighbour and friend Matthieu Lavanchy. We really took our time to build it up. Some pieces are more straightforward, like maybe the Hermès beauty thing, and then some are a bit more mysterious, like the ring with a moon face. That’s something I purchased last year and the kind of object I really like. It was an opportunity to show how I work. Like, the tape is so simple, but image editing is such an important part of what I do, and we do endless amount of dummies, so it’s something I actually use all the time. I also wanted to do something with a bit of humour – and my slightly neurotic and specific office-supply needs are always a bit of a running gag with my colleagues. It was a little bit of a humorous take on that, but also showing how I work and with which tools. Everything in the image is a personal belonging and from the office, and then, of course, Hermès was kind enough to send the lipsticks that Pierre Hardy designed.

Thomas: How do you cope with restrictions in your work? Do you find them useful or necessary in the creative process?

Veronica: If the restriction makes sense from the start and I understand the parameters, I actually quite like to work like that. Sometimes they can also guide you to a specific solution. If it’s a budget, time or technical restriction, you just have to do what you can with the parameters that you have. If they’re the result of someone’s personal tastes, though, then that I find a bit problematic. If it comes out of nowhere, and suddenly all these restrictions are lined up, then you’re like, ‘Where is the space within this for me?’ That can, of course, happen. If I understand where the restrictions are coming from, then they can be creatively positive, as well. A stupid example, maybe, but when I studied graphic design at Rietveld Academie in Amsterdam, we only had an A3 black-and-white laser printer. That was our restriction in terms of making publications, but it guided you to find specific solutions.

Thomas: You also need to be able to have an honest and real conversation with the client…

Veronica: So much of a project’s success is about the conversations you have with the people involved. If you are all pulling in different directions or have a different work ethic, then it can become a damage-control project. That can happen! I’ve also had a lot of projects where it was a very direct conversation and really about building up a working relationship. When I commission photographers I’m ideally looking for a long-term working relationship with someone, and the same with clients or collaborators. I want to create something we can build on, rather than a one-off thing.

‘In general, I am much more drawn towards fashion images that, even if it’s a professional model, almost feel like a portrait of a person.’

Thomas: What in your eyes is a good fashion picture? What do you for?

Veronica: It depends what it is for, fashion or portrait. In general, I am much more drawn towards fashion images that, even if it’s a professional model, almost feel like a portrait of a person.

Thomas: I agree with that. Fashion pictures should first and foremost be a great portrait, the rest is…

Veronica: …the ingredients and how they come together. I also like it when the fashion and the styling takes more of a solution-based approach. We approach certain stories in *The Gentlewoman* a little bit like that. We did a story, which we shot in Denmark with Julie Greve and our fashion editor Eliza Conlon, featuring street-cast women. It was all about outerwear and jeans and it was nice to have this moment in the magazine where you just make a suggestion about what you can do with what you already own. It was a little bit less product-driven, like a sort of creative lookbook.

Thomas: *The Gentlewoman* does have this notion of the how-to guide, to which you have brought a new level of sophistication and irony. You have sort of revived the notion of what’s practical. When I was putting together the group of art directors for the project, I had a really hard time finding women. Why do you think that is?

Veronica: That’s a good question. There are some, but of course not as many as men. When I studied, there were so many women around, but they all sort of disappeared! It’s really sad, and I often get asked that when I teach: how come all the really talented women disappear? I am convinced it’s because the opportunities for female professionals are different from those for men, even if it’s hard to put my finger on exactly why. Maybe it also comes with the whole idea of a creative director being strong-willed and so on, and perhaps sometimes women are looking more for dialogue. Maybe that plays into it. But I also think very often women are simply not given the same opportunities, so they can’t grow into that position. But it’s a good question. I can hardly answer it. What do you think?

‘Opportunities for female art directors are different from those for men. I often get asked when I teach: how come all the talented women disappear?’

Thomas: I come from a different century! Back then, a creative director was supposed to have a lot of interaction with the actual printers, and that would be a very hardcore blue-collar environment… Perhaps that technical element made it something more associated with men, but that can no longer be the reason. Then, within a fashion magazine, the only male presence was probably the creative director. I remember working in fashion magazines back in the 1980s and 1990s and I was probably the only man on the floor, which is quite something. It is almost as if back then, just like with nurses, it was an essentially female endeavour, except for the creative director, who was a man.

Veronica: You know, the whole thing you were saying about the technical aspect of the job – I studied in Amsterdam and there are a lot of very established female graphic designers in Holland. Out of all of the countries I have lived in, it is the most fairly balanced between men and women, and it never seemed like a disadvantage to me. I know that the printers are probably scared now when they know I’m coming! I don’t think it is the technical aspect, though; I really think it’s that the path towards becoming an art director or creative director is not something straightforward. It’s not something that you can study for. That, for me, links up with this idea that a lot of female creative directors just don’t get the same opportunities as men. If you also go through the list of people on panels and at lectures and talks and so on, it is primarily men. It’s shocking to me that either the people who organize these things don’t know anyone or that they don’t do enough research beforehand. It’s something that some organizers don’t reflect upon enough and hopefully that is changing a bit more and people are a little more aware of it.

Thomas: One of our colleagues suggested that maybe being a creative director is a very geeky thing to be.

Veronica: Sure, but women are geeky! Women have become geeky. I mean, did any women that you asked say no to doing this?

Thomas: I asked Ronnie Cooke Newhouse, and she said yes, in principle, and in the end couldn’t fit it into her schedule. There’s another woman, Lolita Jacobs who is part of the couple called LJBTN, but that’s about it.

Veronica: That’s crazy. But for me, really, it is opportunity and visibility that are the problem.

Thomas: That might be so. Next question: what in your work is most intuitive and what part do you tend to overthink?

Veronica: That is a good question. You need a lot of intuition to be on set and working with someone, and you have to be able to let the photographer do the best he or she can do within his or her skill set. So a lot of what makes a good image is intuition. The same is true for who to ask to work on a project or for images. If you click with someone, that is all pretty much intuition. Still-lifes are less intuitive for me than a photo with a model or a sitter; I might have to think more about them. What part do I overthink? I definitely spend a lot of time, once it’s all done, in the image edit, seeing how it all connects up. I always do it, then look at it the next day, go through it again, check the sequence again. I keep reworking and reworking, if it is a publication. Graphic design I don’t overthink so much any more, because compared to creative direction, graphic design is so easy! I definitely take a lot of time to really mould everything into shape and place.

Thomas: Did you strive to be different from a young age?

Veronica: God, no. Not that I can think of, but as a small child, I definitely had an obsession with images, though I wasn't aware of it. I was born in Argentina and my grandmother would always tell me many years later that whenever I went to visit her, the first thing she had to do was pull out a box of photographs. Even when I was two or three years old, I was obsessed with…

Thomas: …with editing family pictures!

Veronica: Apparently so! I had no idea what the profession of creative director was when I was younger or when I was a teenager, but I definitely had a huge interest in art and art history. I had an amazing teacher at high school and he really taught us how to look at things, how to interpret them, and how to fact-check things. Very German! But I never had it in mind that I had to be different. I don't think that really crossed my mind. I definitely had an affinity for visuals from a young age, though.

Thomas: When did it become clearer that this is what you wanted to do?

Veronica: When I was about 16 or 17; that was when I had that amazing teacher, Herr Nohl. I wasn't quite sure how the profession really worked, but started to think about whether it should be graphic design or something else. I actually started with industrial design, but to be honest, I hardly learned anything. I still regret doing it, even if it does sometimes come in handy, like when I design exhibitions. Then I switched to graphic design, and moved from Germany to Amsterdam to study at the Rietveld Academie. I had met someone who was studying there and everything that he told me about its approach sounded so much more intuitive. In Germany, graphic design was very much more service-orientated. A lot of people who graduated would do branding projects for imaginary clients, and I just thought, 'I don't know if I can do that.' I guess I have a curious mind and I really longed for a dialogue with the people around me, and that wasn't really facilitated in Germany. It is a very different mentality in Holland; it is much more creative and expressive.

Thomas: So, how did you get to fashion?

Veronica: I started working in fashion more when I started coming to London twice a year for the magazine production. Slowly but surely I had more clients here. If I had stayed in Amsterdam, then I definitely wouldn't be doing the same jobs.

Thomas: Ideally, do you prefer your work to appeal to an in-the-know niche or a wider audience?

Veronica: There's a balance, I guess. I mean, people who are not in the know might not be able to put into words why something does or doesn't work, but they might be able to feel it. The magazine, especially, has a wide audience and its strength is that it is not just focused on the fashion industry; we get feedback from people from so many different backgrounds. The most important thing for me is that the magazine has a point of view, and an interest that will engage for a longer time. It's a biannual; each issue needs to be able to be on newsstands for half a year. But it is a balance. I think sometimes brands are a bit, like, 'Well, our clients won't understand this', but you have to take them on a journey; you need to be guiding them. It shouldn't be something where you don't understand what the picture is about any more, but also it shouldn't be anything that doesn't have fashion credibility. Ideally, you can have both audiences. The funny thing, though, is that because I do both creative direction and graphic design, I can have quite different peer groups. My peers from the fashion world don't overlap with the design peers, and it's funny, they're very different groups. The geeky designers come from a different background!

Thomas: The 20th century at its best sometimes tried to create what in France in the 1960s was known as 'beauty for all', which is probably an old Bauhaus philosophy, too. Beauty using industrial means to target the entire population.

> **'Through social media and online connections, people tend to be pulled in a similar direction, aesthetically. I find that incredibly frustrating.'**

Veronica: I don't know if you are pointing to this, but through social media and greater online connections, people tend to be pulled in a similar direction, aesthetically. I sometimes find that incredibly frustrating.

Thomas: Does that create a sort of international lukewarm taste?

Veronica: Exactly. There's nothing wrong with it, no tension, no fashion credibility. It's probably good taste, but it's not personal and not expressive and not much more than superficially interesting.

Thomas: Another of our peers said that there was a time when you could create long-lasting fashion imagery; fashion images from other decades seemed to have a lasting quality. He was saying that perhaps today given the inflation of image production, images tend to disappear into thin air. I thought that that was both a beautiful and a disturbing idea.

Veronica: Totally true. Some photographers shoot so much that what they do is sometimes great and at other times a sort of whittled-down version. On the other hand, given that they do so many projects, people might not pick that out any more. We work much more digitally now than even five years ago, but I am always struck when I see something on Instagram by a photographer and I think, 'Oh, that is interesting', then I see it in print, and realize that actually it was made for Instagram, not for print. I wonder if the thought of it being in print makes you take a picture differently.

Thomas: It might also be that the quantity of images produced these days in a commercial fashion environment makes it very difficult to refine things. One can no longer afford the luxury of actually spending the time needed to put things together. In order to produce so much, you need to resort to prefabricated recipes.

Veronica: Absolutely. I mean, there are probably campaigns still on people's mood boards that were made in the 1990s, and they had a week or even two to shoot them.

Thomas: We had a week to do about 10 images.

Veronica: Wow, I mean, I have never experienced that!

Thomas: The process was very extravagant. Then again I know photographers who are incredibly fast and yet very precise and specific, like Steven Meisel, who literally shoots in three minutes.

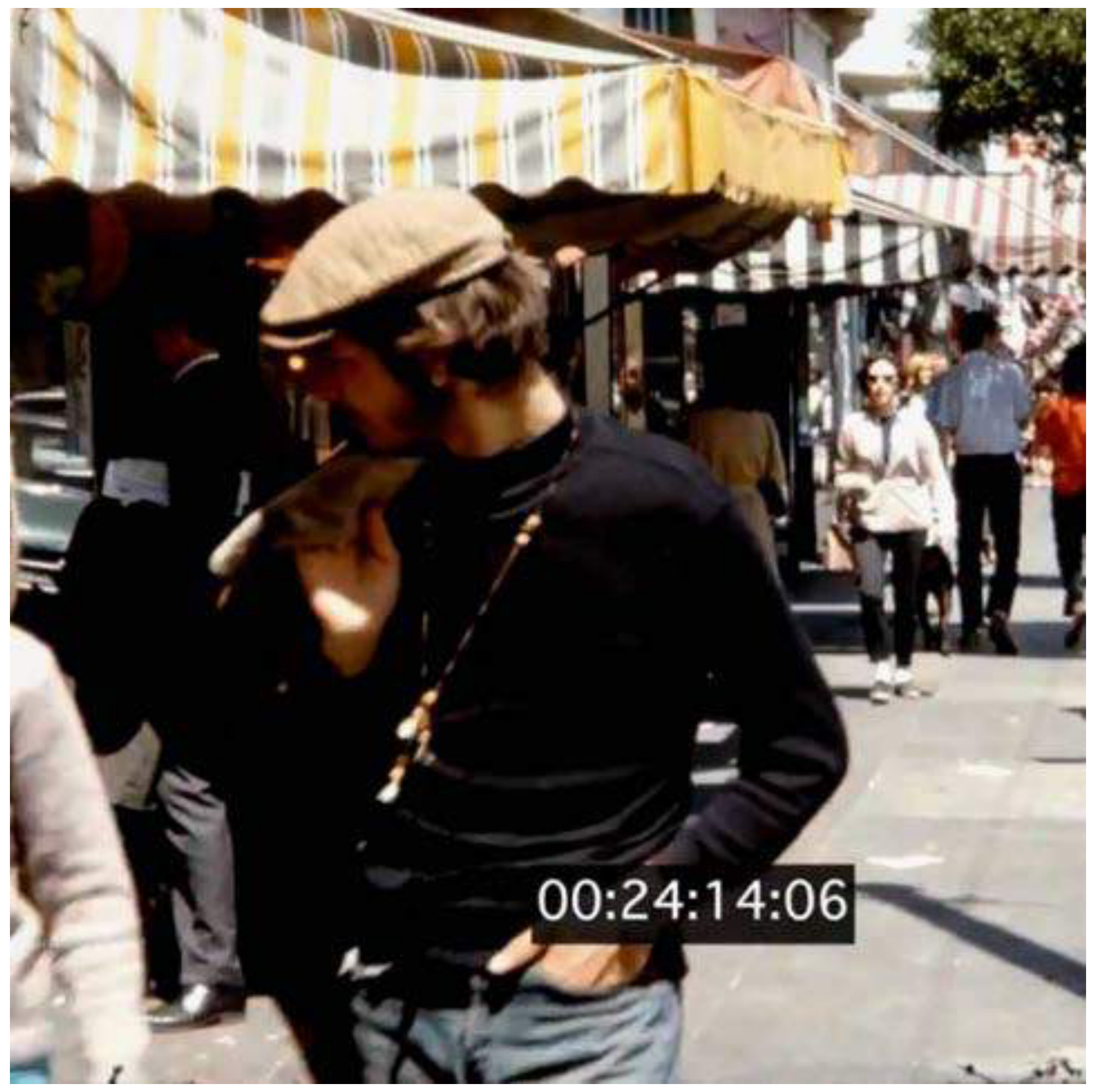
Veronica: Because he puts a lot of prep into it?

Thomas: When he arrives on set, everything is ready, and he gets it in very little time. I think he is probably interested in keeping some freshness in the process and not making it too tedious for the model. He is very interested in the relationship with the model.

Veronica: It's true, you can kill a shoot before it actually happens. Managing to keep the energy on the shoot day, that is another instance of where that element of intuition comes in. Of course, our job is all about planning and thinking of all of the different scenarios and outcomes that could happen, and then showing people what the picture will hopefully be like. But sometimes you can also do that to such an extent that it leaves no room for the picture to have any energy, which is something I'm always looking for.

Thomas: Do you think that the near future will be more about escapism and fantasy or will you double down on realism and documenting the moment?

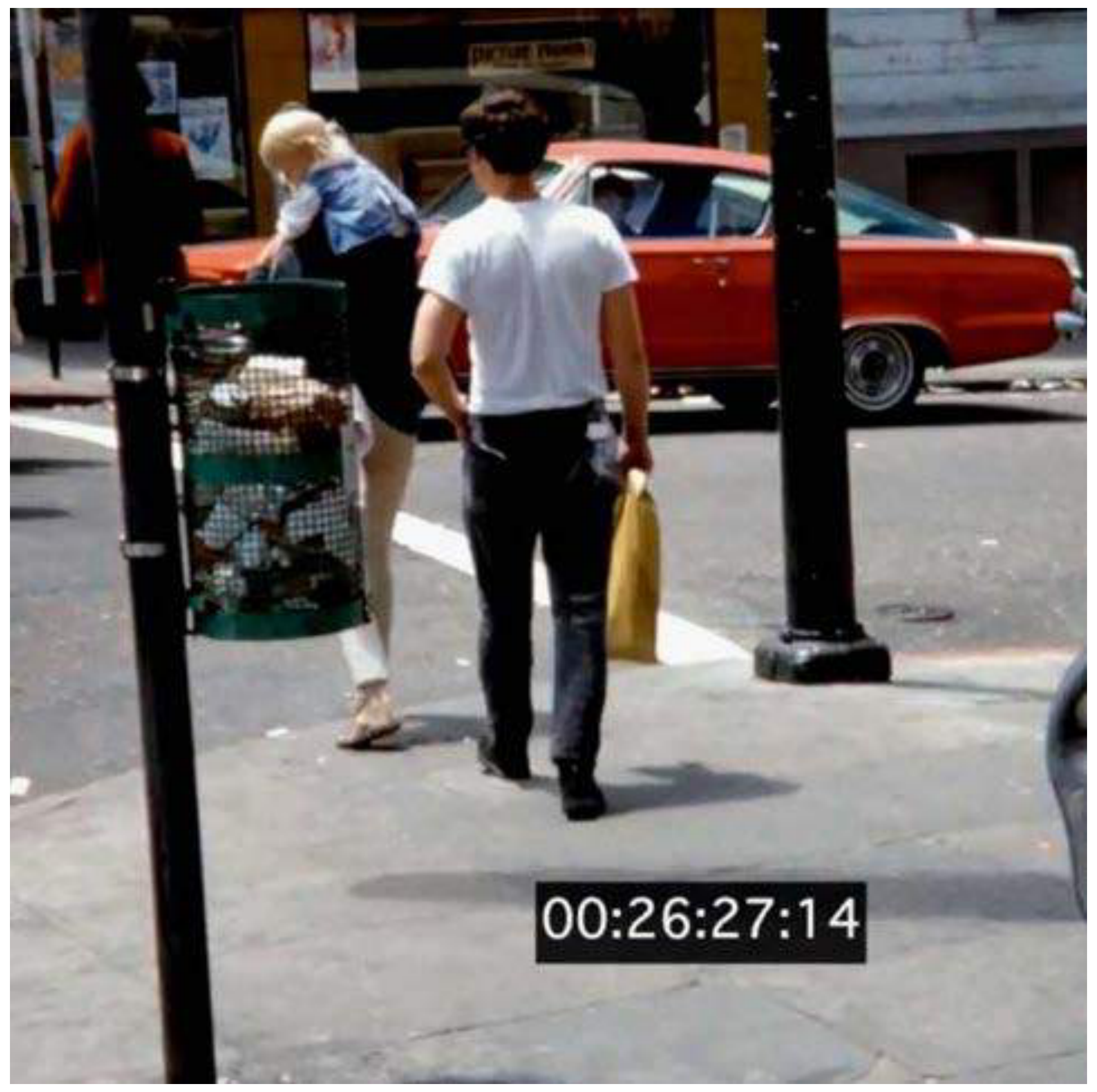
Veronica: At the start of all of this, I found it incredibly difficult to imagine what we would want to see come autumn, because of the mental state that I and everyone else was in. I would hope that it's a sort of balance of the two. Reality is always very important to how I approach things, but then I do also appreciate things that are maybe a bit more, let's call it, fantasy. It is so hard to say what even is to come. In the end, people are going to have to stick with their strengths, continue on that path, then adapt to the new situation – and hopefully do it with thought.



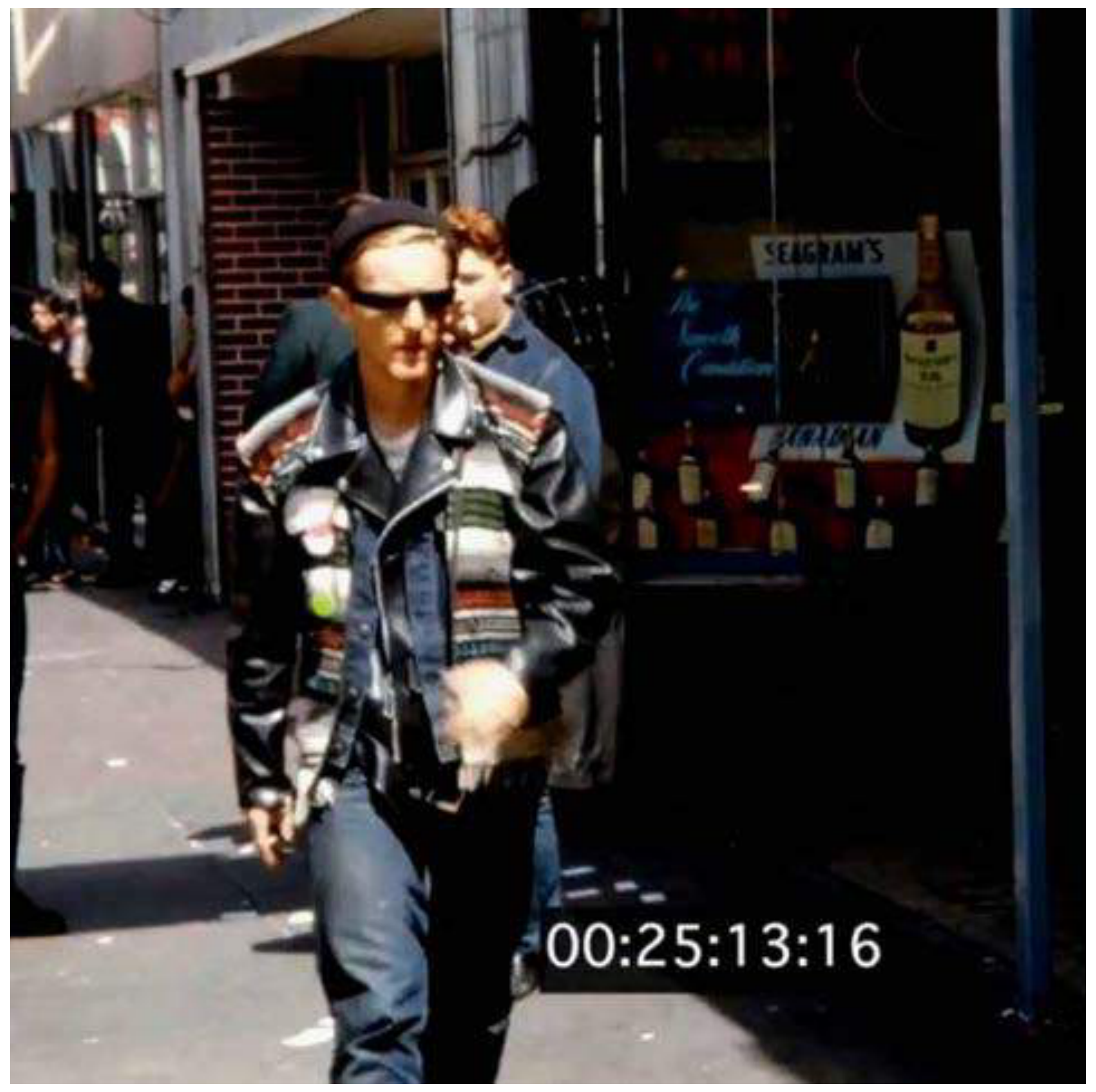
Ashbury

CREATIVE DIRECTION BY
ATELIER FRANCK DURAND

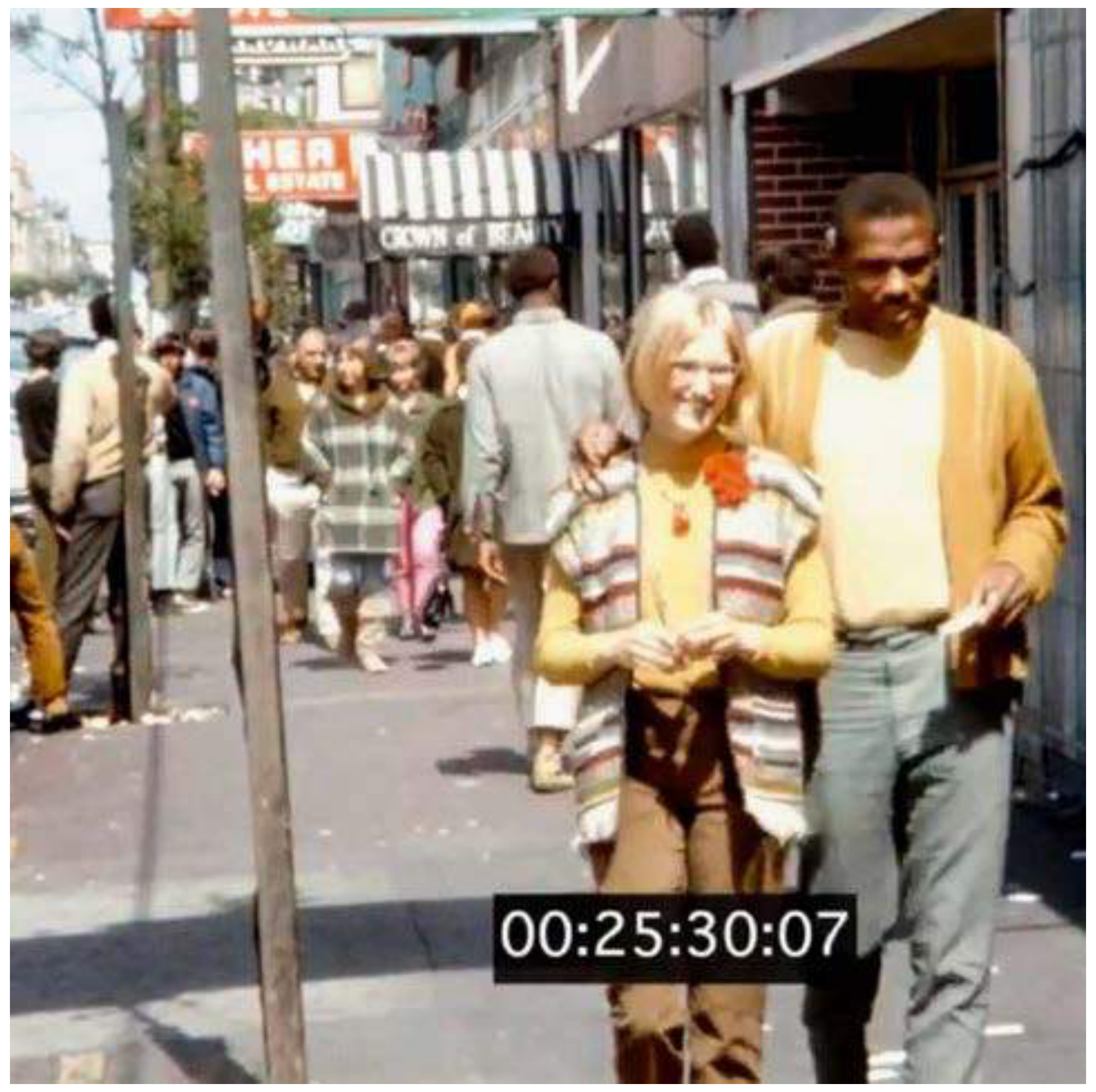
TEXT BY
MARC BEAUGÉ



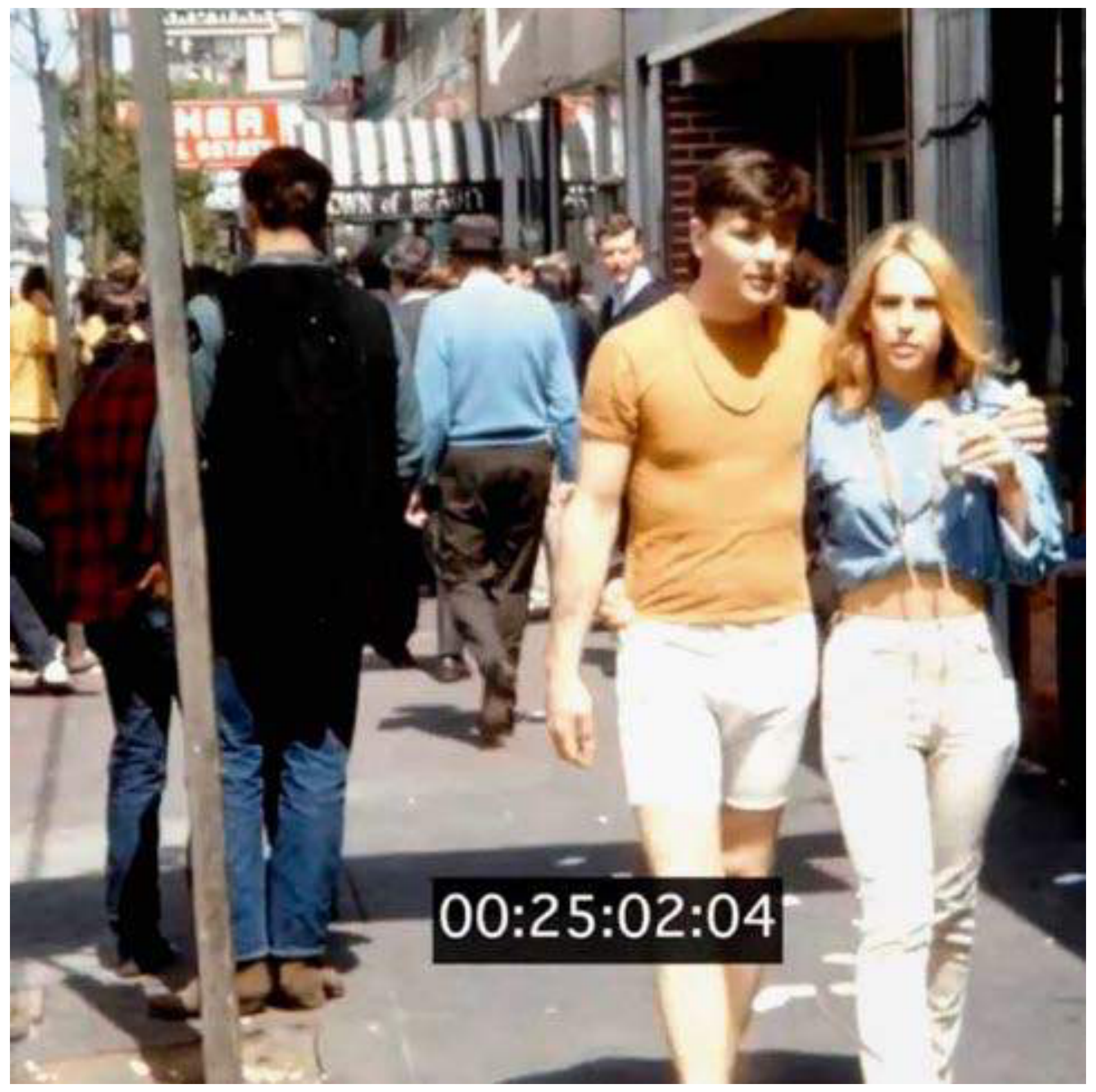
Le modèle de dos est vêtu d'un pantalon 5 poches en corduroy noir Levi's et d'un t-shirt blanc Hanes. À ses pieds, on distingue une paire de Desert Boots noires de chez Clarks. Page opposée : Cet homme porte une casquette plate achetée chez Johnny's, boutique spécialisée de Chicago. Son pull à col cheminée est un Jantzen, son jeans un Levi's 501. Le collier vient d'un marché artisanal de San Francisco.



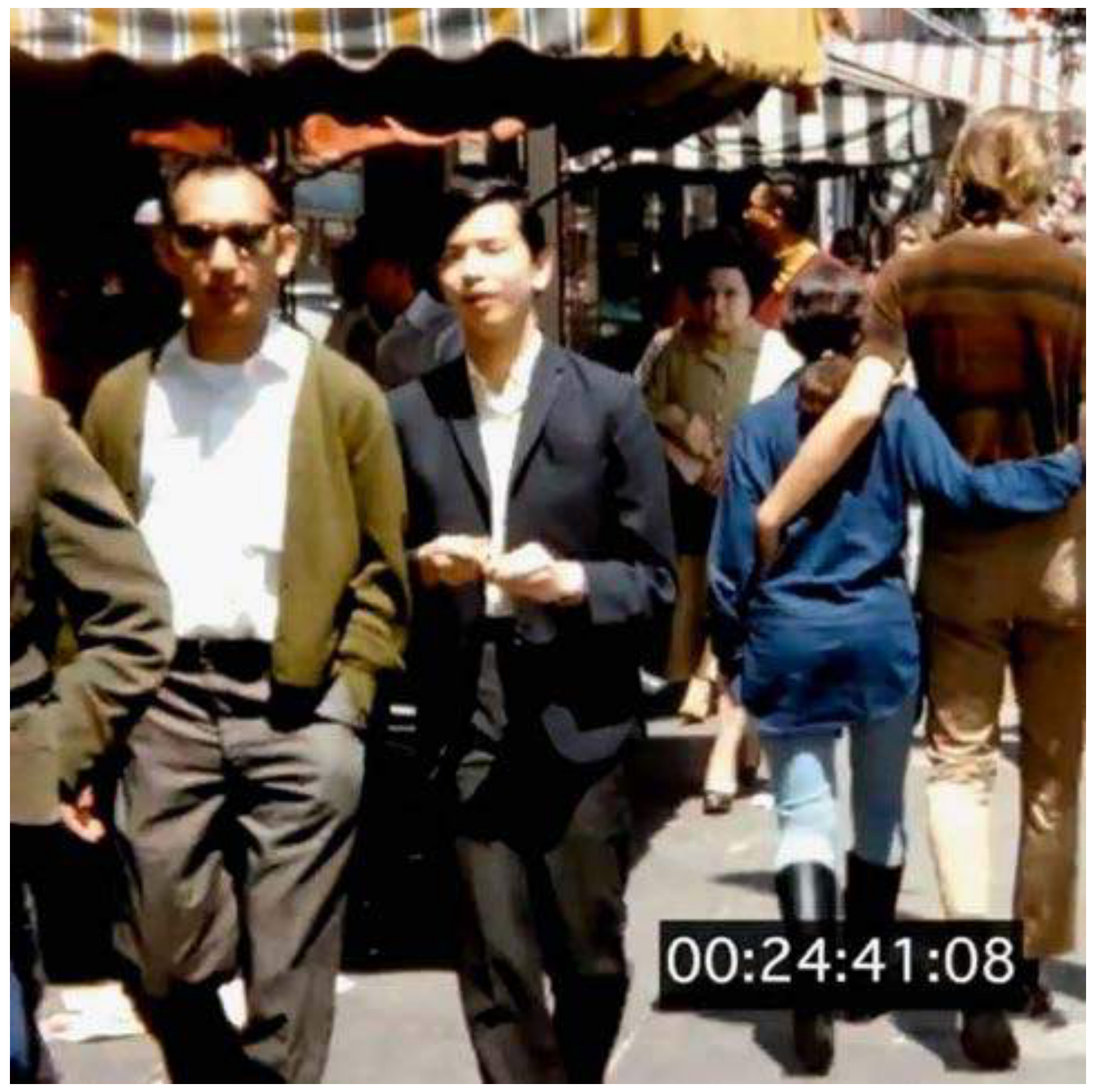
Sur ses épaules, ce jeune homme a superposé trois pièces : un perfecto Schott « One Star »,
une trucker jacket Lee Rider et un gilet najavo artisanal.
Les lunettes de soleil sont des Ray-Ban Bausch & Lomb, trouvées chez Culture Frames.



La jeune fille arbore un gilet najavo artisanal, un pull L.L.Bean et un pantalon
en duck canvas. L'homme à ses côtés porte un gilet de chez Sears, appartenant à son père. En dessous,
un t-shirt jaune Holiday Boileau. Pantalon sans marque.

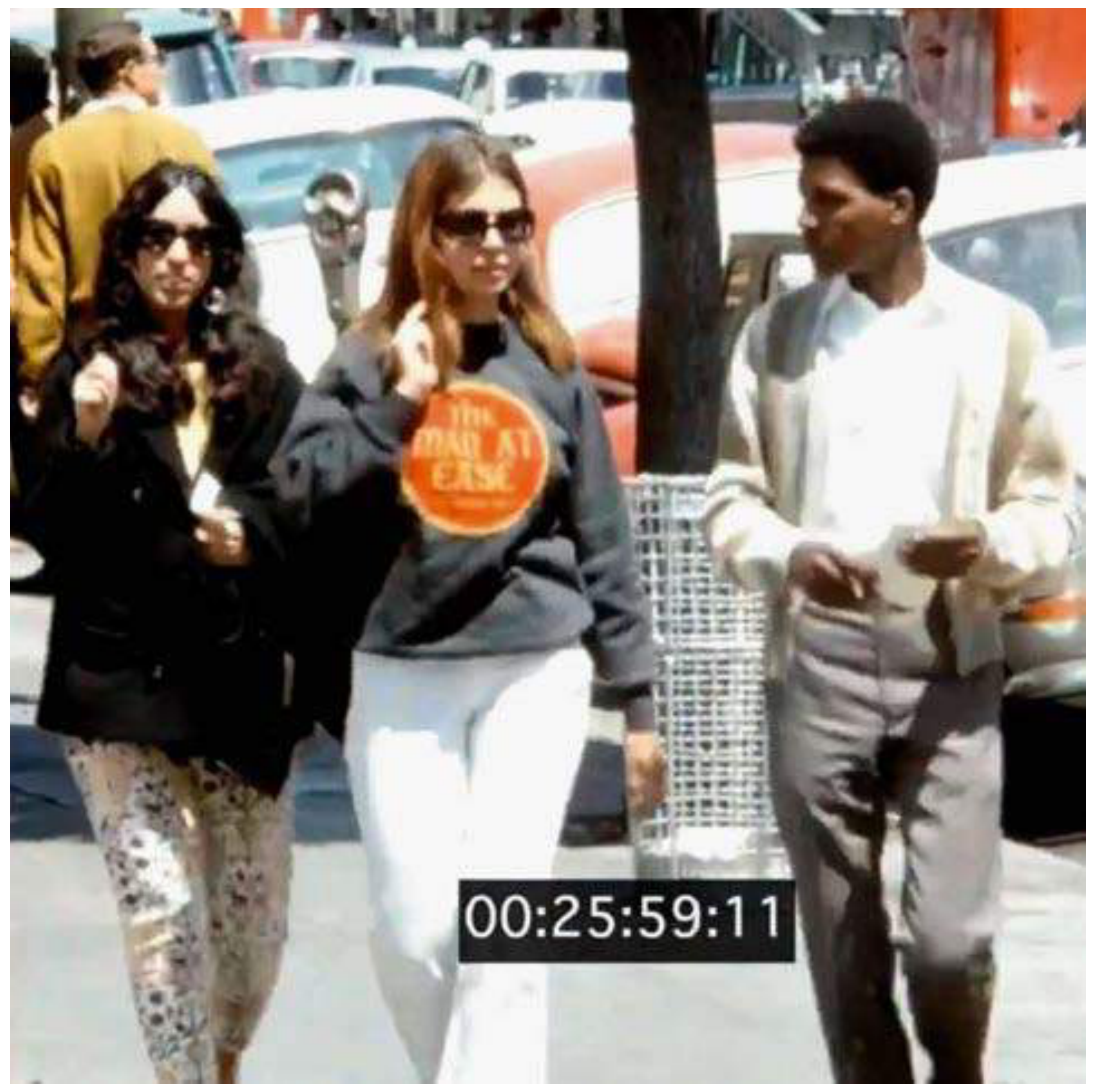


La jeune fille à droite porte un jean Lee et une chemise en chambray Big Mac.
À sa droite, un homme vêtu d'un t-shirt Velva Sheen et d'un pantalon 5 poches blanc Levi's coupé.

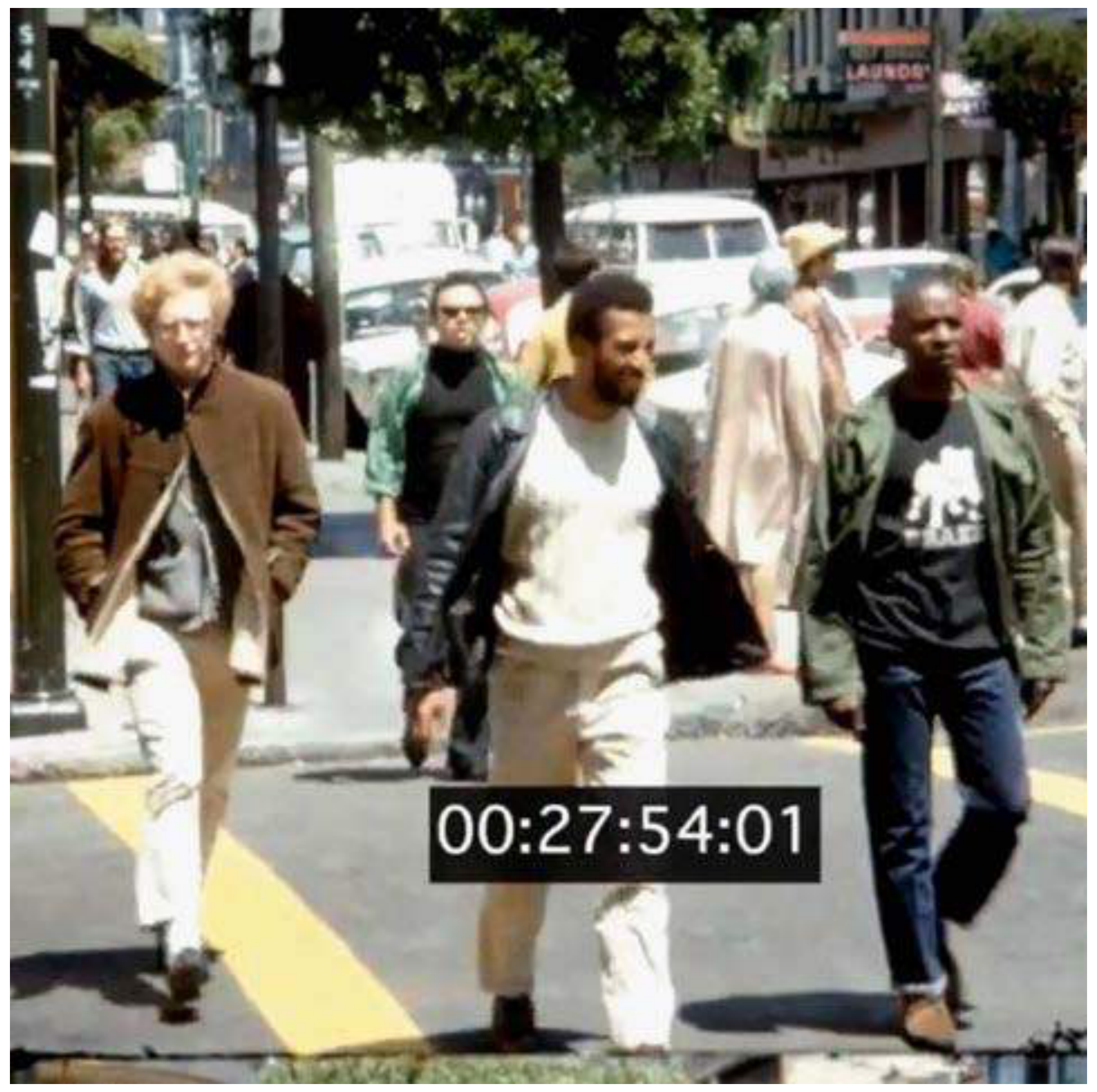


Sur la gauche, l'homme porte un cardigan et une chemise achetés chez JCPenney.
Ses lunettes sont des American Optical. À côté de lui, un homme vêtu d'un blazer
et d'un pantalon J.Press. La chemise est une Gant.

WEST POINT
U.S.M.A.
00:24:06:23



Au centre, la jeune fille porte un sweat-shirt du bar de San Francisco «The Mad At Ease» et un jeans Wrangler. À sa droite, le garçon porte un cardigan sans marque, une chemise Van Heusen et un pantalon Brooks Brothers. Page précedente : Le jeune homme au deuxième plan arbore un sweat-shirt à l'effigie de l'école militaire de West Point, en provenance de la boutique Le Vif. Devant lui, un homme habillé d'une veste McGregor, modèle Drizzler.



Le jeune homme blond porte une veste en corduroy de chez Holiday Boileau. Ses chaussettes écrues sont des Wigwam. Au centre, le modèle porte une veste en cuir trouvée sur un flea market, un pull torsadé Woolrich et un pantalon sans marque. À droite, un jeune homme vêtu d'une veste militaire M-51, d'un sweat-shirt non identifié et d'un jeans Resolute, en provenance de chez Beige Habilleur. Aux pieds, il porte des mocassins Minnetonka.

Screenshots from the film, Hippie Community, *Late 1960s, Haight Ashbury, San Francisco,*
part of Kinolibrary's archive film collections

‘I like an image with few elements and little artifice.’

A conversation with Franck Durand, 10 May 2020.

Thomas Lenthal: Thanks for your portfolio. It’s been such an exciting exercise as we’ve realized just how personal each creative director’s response is. Could you walk me through yours?

Franck Durand: Basically, these are the kind of videos I love and collect. I didn’t actually know the videos that are in the portfolio beforehand; Gauthier [Borsarello, designer and stylist] had posted them not so long ago. They show San Francisco in the 1960s in what was, in terms of style, the hippie neighbourhood.

Thomas: Are the videos drawn from silent vintage Super 8 footage? And are they part of a larger body of work?

Franck: Exactly, an image bank collected the videos, but it doesn’t record where each is from or who made it; they’re all “home” videos.

Thomas: Have you been watching this type of video for a while?

Franck: Yes, I find home videos are intrinsically very touching; they capture a moment in time, which is always quite fascinating.

Thomas: Walk me through the process for the portfolio. It looks like you created screenshots onto which you inserted credits mentioning different brands?

Franck: Not exactly, which is precisely the most interesting aspect. I asked Marc Beaugé[1] to add what are almost like credits to the image by trying to be a little more narrative, as if we were telling a short story. I thought it was interesting to stick closely to what you can see on the image. We placed credits like Clarks and Levi’s, which are potentially genuine, on the images. The clothes haven’t necessarily changed. We even added possibly vintage or personal clothes into the archive images. And Marc wrote a great text. This is exactly the type of thing that I enjoy doing. My personal tastes are undoubtedly part of what I sent back to you.

Thomas: That’s exactly what I find so entertaining about the whole exercise: everyone we asked came up with a unique visual response that also – consciously or unconsciously – reveals their personal view of fashion. Are restrictions useful or even a necessary part of the creative process?

Franck: I think so. I was a little freaked out when the *System* proposal came through, and it seemed to be a free-for-all. Personally, I prefer having to deal with restrictions, particularly in stylistic exercises. It’s actually part of what I like about what I do: having to create something with what I have. It’s essential to me.

Thomas: What makes a good fashion photograph or a good photograph, more generally? Have your ideas about that changed over time?

Franck: A good photograph is one that best suits the requirements of a particular client. A photograph that client X finds beautiful could be a disaster for client Y. It all depends, but essentially, I am fond of an extremely pared down and minimalistic aesthetic. I like an image with few elements and little artifice.

Thomas: It’s amusing because three quarters of the British creative directors are obsessed with the narrative dimension of their images. I’ve always had the impression that that’s really not a French thing; that in the French way of thinking, the narrative aspect of photographic images is sometimes incidental, of secondary importance in any case.

Franck: Yes, what distinguishes French creative directors is that, even if they can be inspired by stuff from the UK or elsewhere, they will always strip back and simplify.

Thomas: You’re referring to the notion of the essential, that idea of basic outline to reach another level or to capture something else?

Franck: A sort of sincerity, of genuine contact with something palpable. A moment in which interaction is possible. We’re removing the barrier or the distance between how we imagine fashion and reality.

Thomas: In that sense, there’s a direct relationship with the character you’re shooting?

Franck: Yes, we’re trying to capture their sensitivity and emotions, to ‘feel’ them, in a way. The concept of fashion photographs can involve a kind of artifice that creates a certain distance. I rarely go in that direction.

Thomas: Do you remember a particular moment, image, reference or person from when you were growing up that set you on the road to a career in fashion?

Franck: Yes, it was all a mix of contradictory elements. The key moment was when I was 14 or 15 at a boarding school in Loches in the Touraine region. It was completely in the middle of nowhere.

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> **‘There was a period when you could take your time. If the client wasn’t satisfied with an image, then you simply continued working to find the right one.’**

A friend of mine had family in London and he came back from a trip there with *i-D* and *The Face*, which I obviously didn’t know about. I was kind of shocked to discover that such crazy things were happening in the world.

Thomas: So that was *The Face* during Neville Brody’s reign?

Franck: It must have been during his time.

Thomas: Do you remember a cover?

Franck: Yes, there was one – perhaps not that particular one – that showed a very cute blonde model called Mizzi, dressed in Vivienne Westwood, sporting a crown.[2] It was during that era, in any case. Later on in my journey, it was Marc Ascoli and Nick Knight’s work for Yohji [Yamamoto] that completely turned my world upside down. They aroused emotions that I’d never felt for something like that before. For someone who’d never seen images of fashion like that, it was a completely new world.

Thomas: Has your way of working, your approach, changed since you started out?

Franck: It’s changed over time because back then I thought that beauty was essentially found in what could be tied to photography and fashion. I believed that fashion and images could bring beauty to our lives; then that changed. My approach is no longer centred exclusively around that particular aspect and, with hindsight, I’ve also become critical of our profession to a certain extent. I also think that between my high-school years and today, the world has changed considerably and so has our profession. It was much more like a craft.

Thomas: It’s interesting that you mention the idea of craft, as many of us in the profession used to discuss how we needed time to work properly, similar to craft artisans. It’s true that until, let’s say, 15 years ago, there was a sense that you could take the time you needed to do things properly. And then little by little, the pressure of new media brought about an acceleration in production, which in turn compressed time in a strange way and into which people settled more or less comfortably. There are those who haven’t adjusted and others who accept it as an unavoidable commercial imperative. The fact remains that we’re somewhat nostalgic about the idea of having enough time.

Franck: Yes, it’s something we all reflect on. There was a period when you could take your time and if the client wasn’t satisfied with an image, then you simply had to continue working to find the right one. Nowadays, clients pressure you to keep moving on to the next idea in order to have as many images as possible. That’s the stark reality for all of us. It’s become a matter of quantity, rather than quality.

Thomas: Which is the least intuitive aspect of your work and which flows much more easily?

Franck: I have the impression that if I don’t have a clear idea beforehand of what I am going to do and what I can bring to the table, then I simply don’t go there. I need to be able to imagine the work in its totality before I can start.

Thomas: You mean that if you don’t have an initial flash of inspiration, then there’s no point?

Franck: If I don’t find an overriding theme, then no. If I find one, then I have the ability to create a wide range of possibilities that will be in tune with my work and who I am. There are many incredible brands that I totally respect, but for whom I simply couldn’t envisage working because I wouldn’t bring anything to the table.

Thomas: Why do you think that is? To give you some context, many of our fellow creative directors have said that they won’t take a job unless they are able to be in direct contact with the decision-maker, in this case the fashion designer. But no one so far has said that there are brands they respect, but with which they wouldn’t know where to begin.

Franck: I enjoy being able to develop something; it’s satisfying being able to bring something to the table. There has to be positive evolution in what I can contribute. I’m not going to name names, but if a brand has too many guidelines, then what I actually enjoy doing just won’t be satisfying. Ultimately, that would result in my contribution being diluted and bowdlerized.

Thomas: You wouldn’t be able to provide the full service?

Franck: I really respect the notion of work and of work well done. There are many things that I really like and that I respect because they are well done. I like it when I can contribute something.

Thomas: Put simply, you prefer an ailing patient to a healthy one?

Franck: That’s more or less how I position my practice and what I like to do. For example, I can’t see any interest in working for Prada, because it’s great as it is. Certain of my clients were potentially sick, but not all of them, even if some of them had certain weaknesses.

Thomas: In an ideal world, do you prefer your work to appeal to a more niche and in-the-know demographic, or are you aiming to appeal to a wider audience?
Franck: As I don't really know either, I do as I see fit; I don't do it for one side or the other.
Thomas: But do the accolades of the niche interest you more than recognition from the general public?
Franck: What is important and interesting is having the feeling that you'll be able to do something, then doing it, and finally receiving positive feedback. That's also where you can find satisfaction. I'm not asking myself if I will appeal to one or the other; what interests me is that my contribution works. Creating great work that doesn't reach anyone and that doesn't keep the economic engine turning is pointless. It's not in my nature to think, 'Never mind, let's do it anyway, even if only four people will appreciate it.' What's interesting is when a doctor restores the patient to good health.

> **'Creating great work that doesn't reach anyone and that doesn't keep the economic engine turning is, in my opinion, pointless.'**

Thomas: Which figure in fashion history do you most admire and why?
Franck: The person who immediately springs to mind is Irving Penn, for a particular reason. At the beginning of his career in the 1940s, he already had a specific photographic style that he was able to reproduce until the end of his life. His work had a common unifying thread: there were never any low points; he remained constant, without betraying himself. He may have changed models and stylists over time, but his work remained constant and relevant. The same can be said of other photographers, some of whom only shot one great photograph in their whole lives, but Irving Penn is the one who springs to mind.

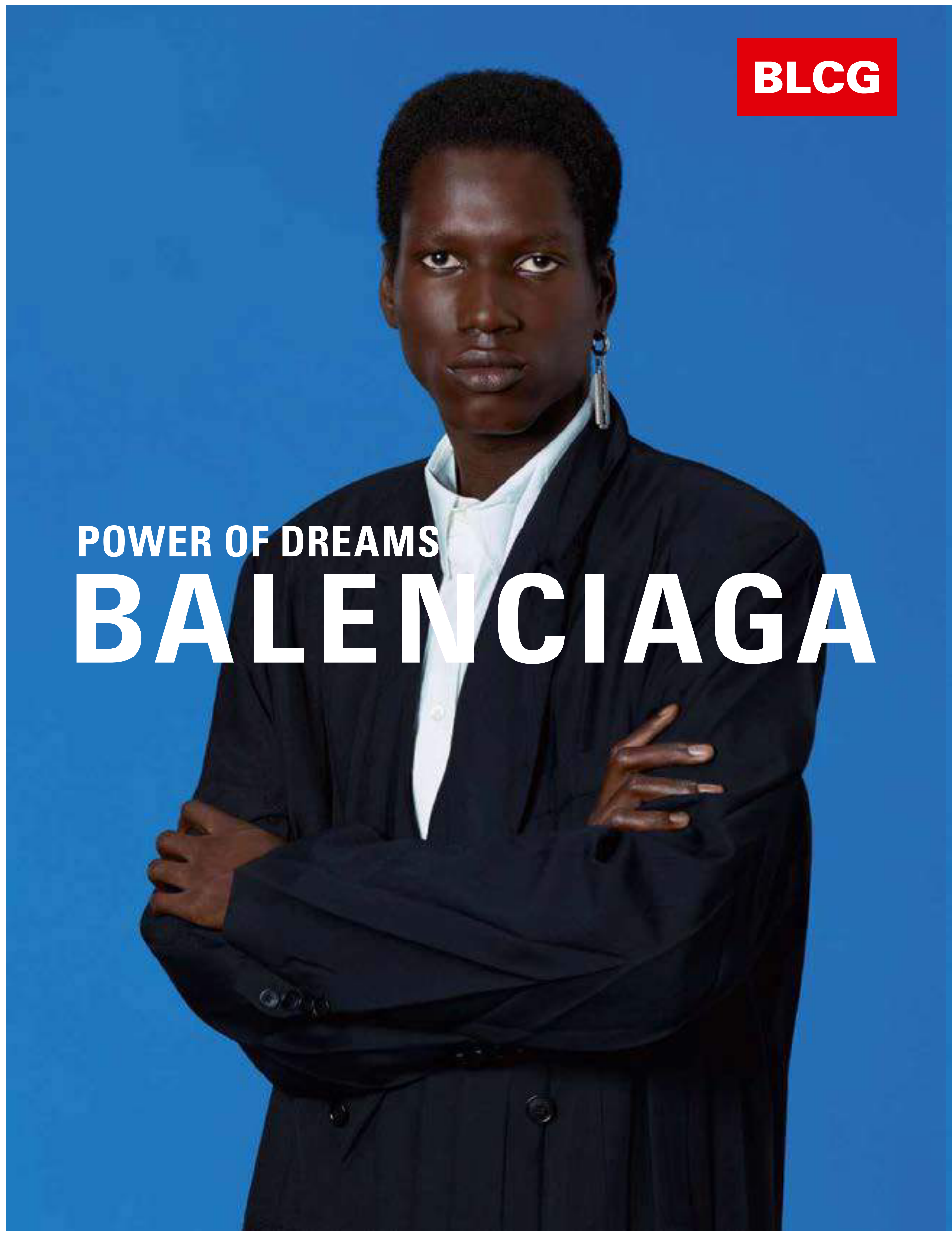
Thomas: Can you describe a professional disappointment? For example, other creative directors told me about their disappointment of only realizing they were losing a client when they saw something on social media...
Franck: A very long time ago, I found out about something like that during a lunch; everyone knew – except me.
Thomas: What did you learn from that experience?
Franck: It's always disappointing on a human level above all. You can't compartmentalize work, people and life; it's an organic whole. You have to be able to take a step back; they are life experiences rather than professional ones. You have to face disappointments and frustrations every day and learn how to live with them and put them in perspective. Being bitter about things would be the worst outcome.

Thomas: When pseudo-normality returns, do you think that you'll want to produce images that are dream-like or escapist, or will you lean more towards a documentary and realist style?
Franck: It wasn't planned, but my subjects for this season are all linked to a form of hyperrealism. They express my desire to employ the least artifice possible. So that's a mood that suits me for what may be coming. I don't know if it's due to a general groundswell or not, but we all know that in fashion photography, we do tend to go suddenly in the opposite direction of what we've liked for a while. Perhaps we'll see an exaggerated trend in completely the opposite direction, maybe not immediately, but in the months to come.
Thomas: Do you think that your penchant for a more minimalistic style will connect with something people might have discovered during the lockdown?
Franck: Possibly, but I don't think there will be a single direction. On an individual level, you don't have one single desire, you can have three or four, which are sometimes contradictory. Consequently, things are going to be mixed up in ways I can't really predict. No one single image will come out after lockdown, and everyone will have their own personal interpretation. Perhaps even large-scale oppositions will be at play. I do, however, feel that ostentation will take a hit.
Thomas: It's not unreasonable to think that people will keep a lower profile during an economic crisis.
Franck: It might have the reverse effect; perhaps people will also want to leave the doldrums and we can use images to make them all dream. It all depends on what constitutes a dream and we don't all agree on that! We won't see one type of reaction, but there will be a genuine response to what has, despite everything, been a shared, global shock.

Thomas: Do you miss our professional context? You know, travelling to a location to shoot photos, getting models in, meeting up with teams all over the world. All that intense movement. Do you want to return to that life or have you enjoyed life without it?
Franck: I used to be intensely scared of flying and was never that happy to travel. Then I managed to overcome my anxiety and began to enjoy flying, even though it's somewhat controversial to say that nowadays. I was really happy to beat my fear and go all over the place, putting together teams that met up on location. But limitations suit me really well, too: I like the idea of being able to work effectively with what's readily available. It's going to be really interesting.
Thomas: My last question is somewhat melancholic. Do you think that it's still possible to be unique nowadays and is that even valued today? Having a personality and a stance not necessarily in sync with the contemporary world, having different points of view – does that still have value today?
Franck: Yesterday or the day before I came across a text by Socrates in which he was complaining that the kids had no respect for anything and that the world was a much worse place; a very banal thought in the end. Even if we have the impression that everything changes, the underlying subject actually remains the same. Being unique in one way or another, the circumstances are different to 50 years ago, but nothing ever changes really. You have to keep a certain distance from shared taste – that's what is important.

1.Style journalist Marc Beaugé is editor in chief of Franck Durand's magazine *Holiday*.

2. Malta-born Suzanne Mizzi made her name in the UK as a topless model in the 1980s. She switched to catwalk and fashion modelling in the early 1990s and became the face of Vivienne Westwood. In 1991, she was voted the woman readers of *Esquire* would most like to take on a shopping trip to Paris, and her body was insured by a lingerie company for £11 million. Later an interior decorator and artist, she died of ovarian cancer in 2011 at the age of 43.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POWER OF DREAMS
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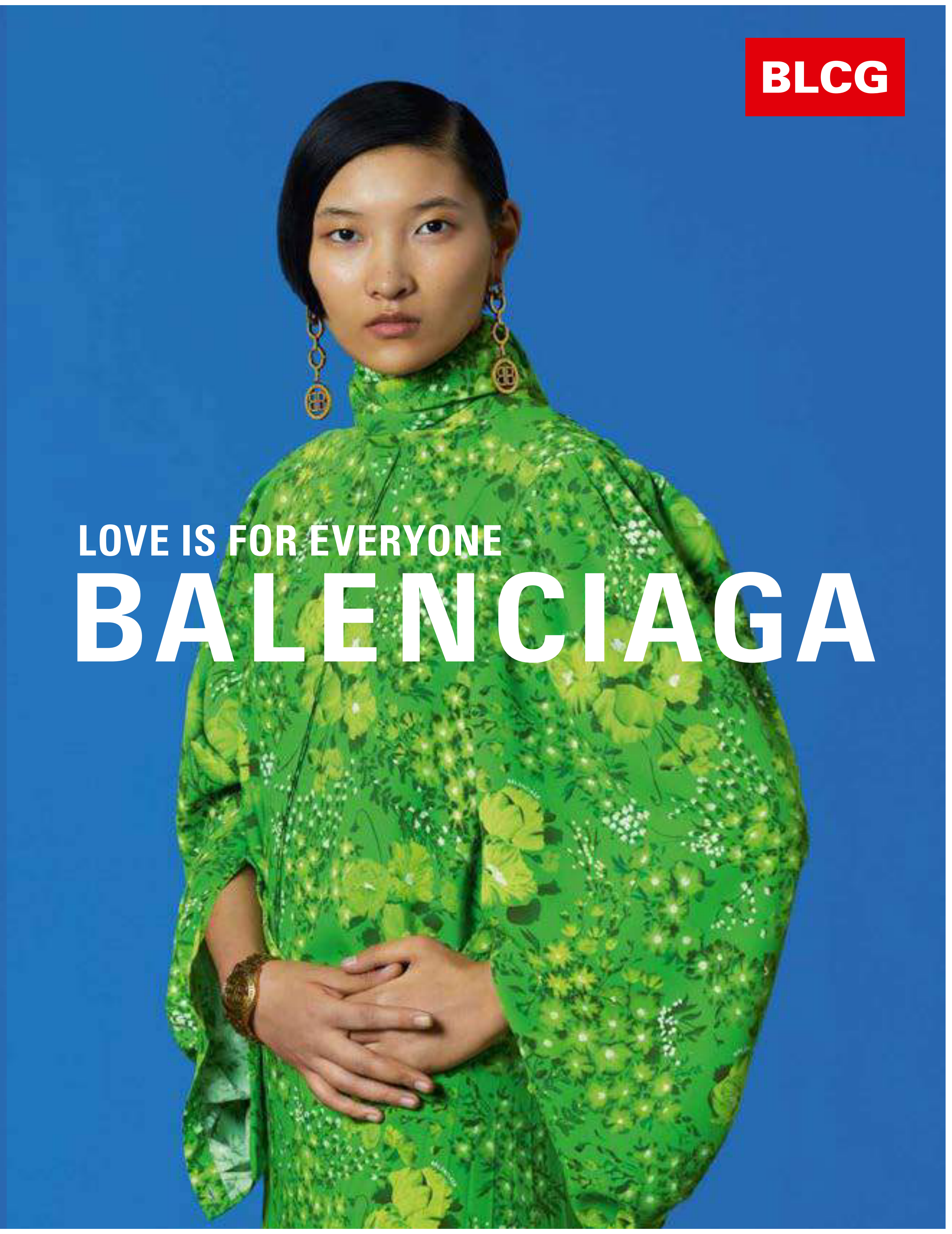
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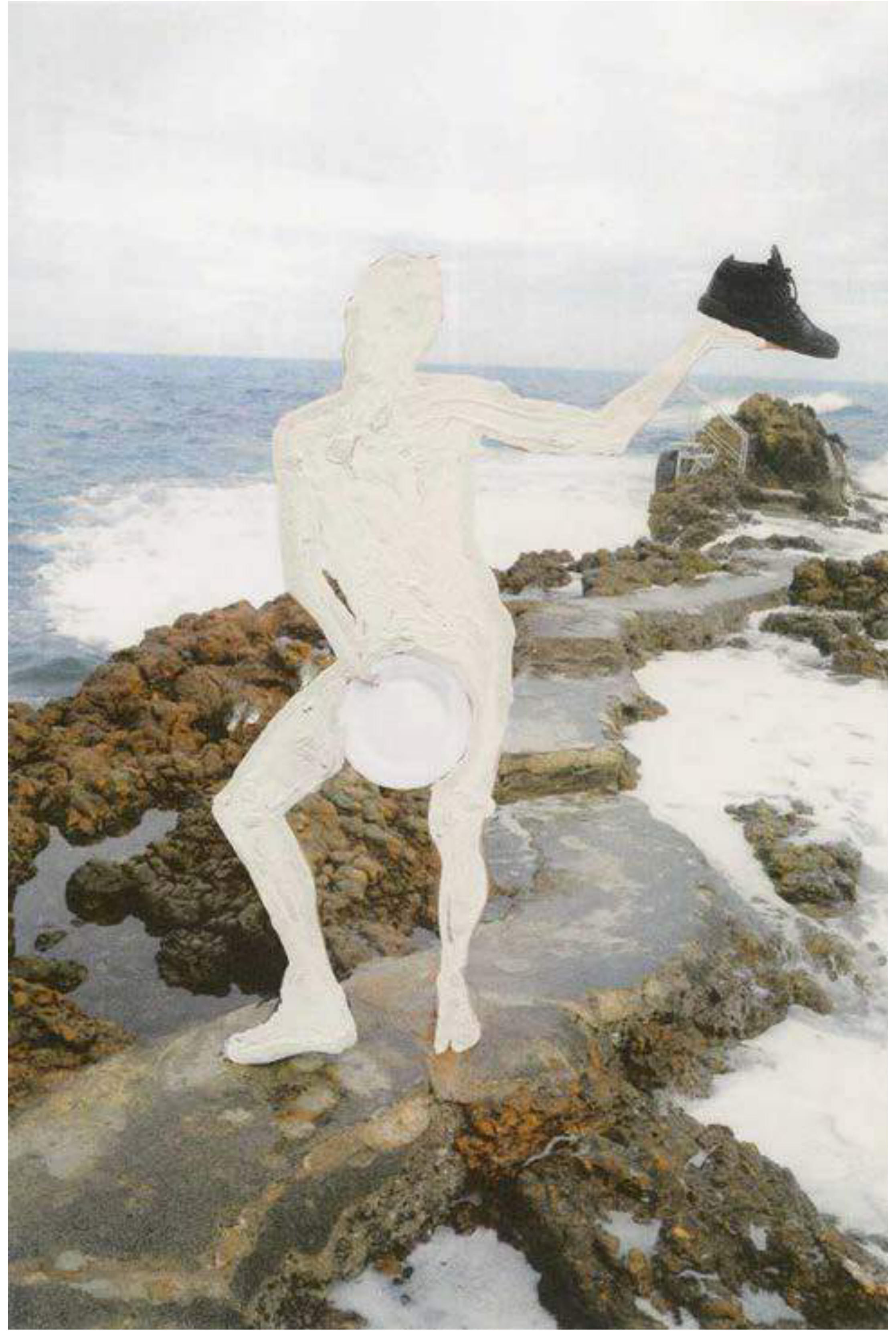
CREATIVE DIRECTOR DENNIS FREEDMAN



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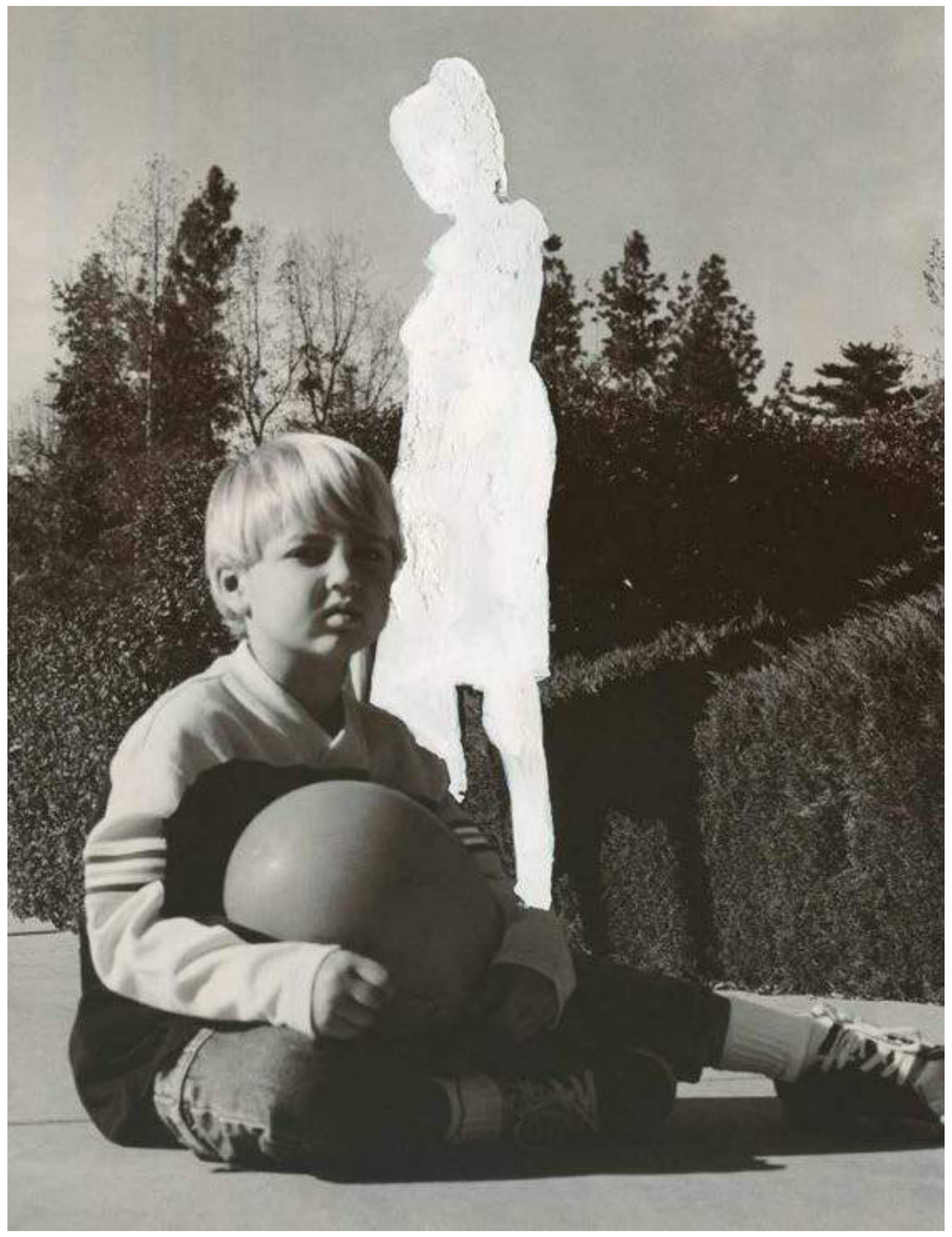
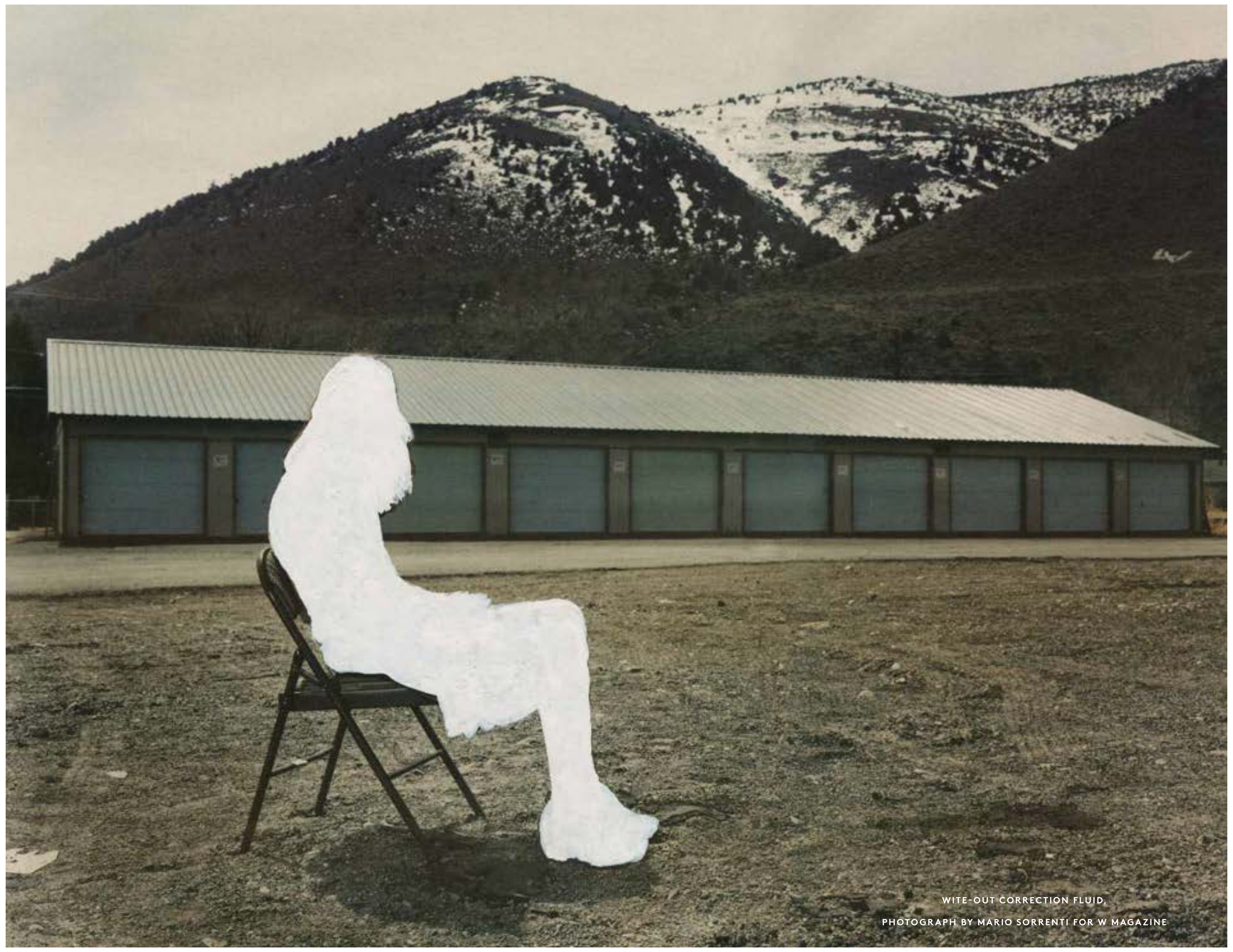
WITE-OUT CORRECTION FLUID, PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHAEL THOMPSON FOR W MAGAZINE





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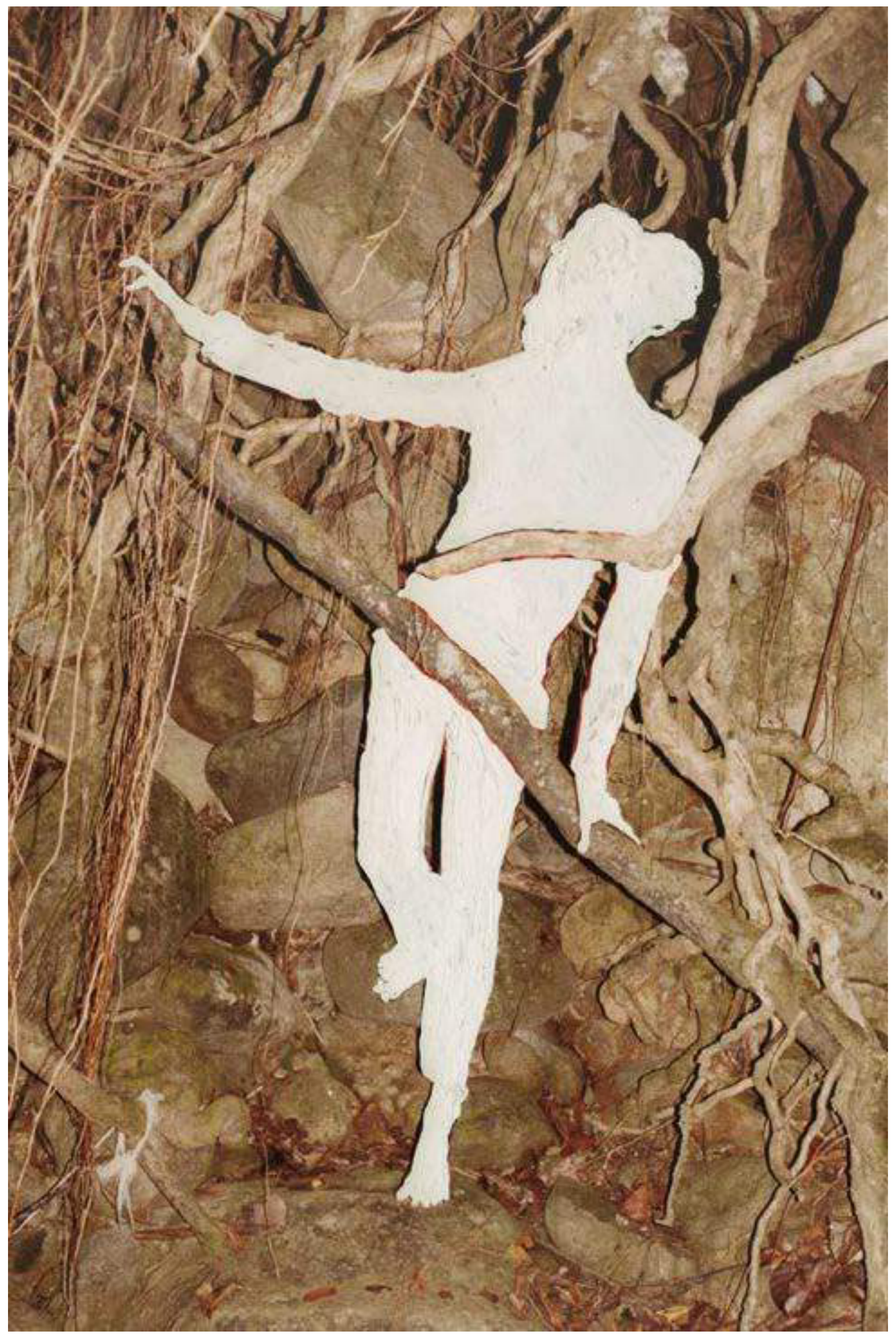
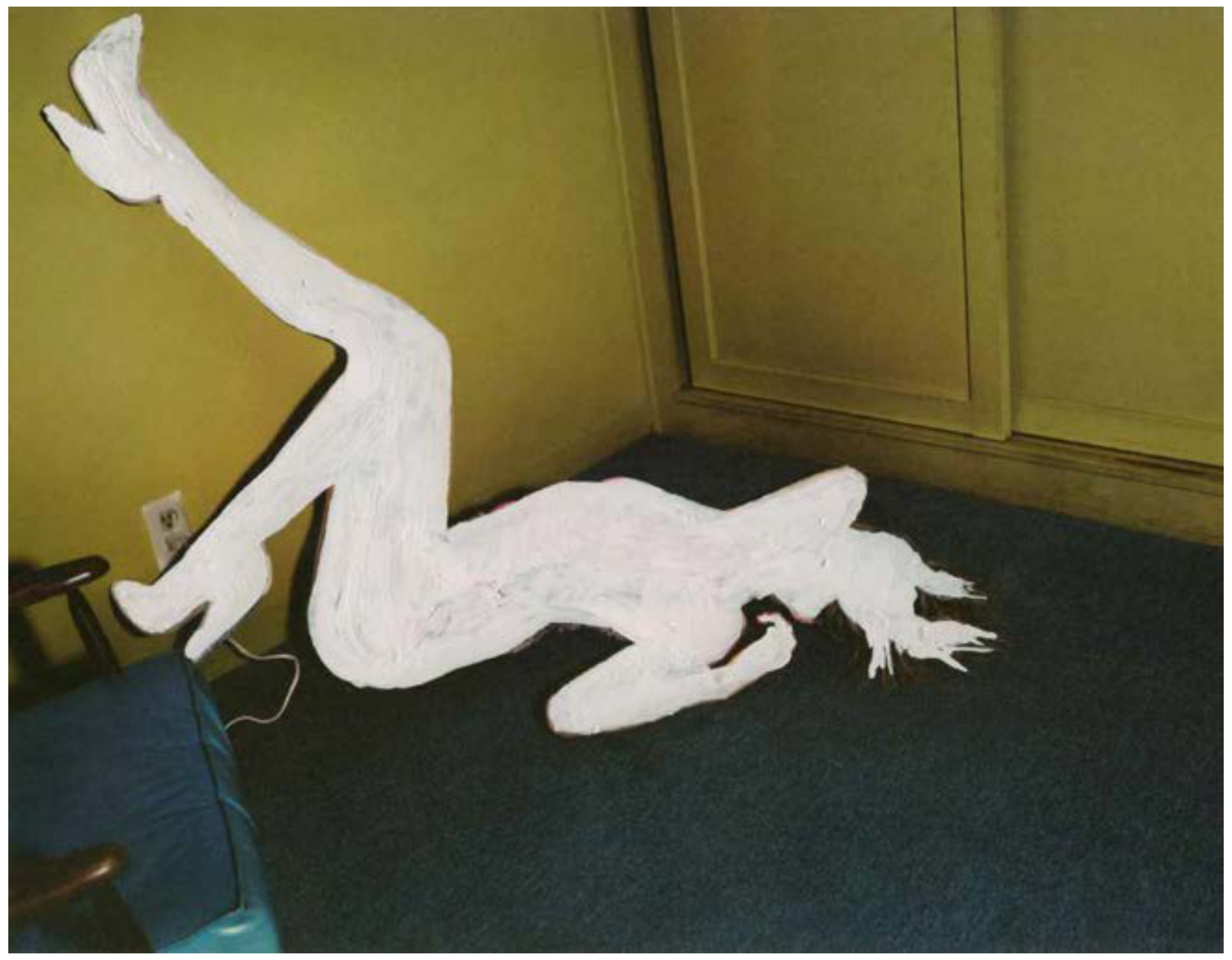
WITE-OUT CORRECTION FLUID, PHOTOGRAPH BY JUERGEN TELLER FOR W MAGAZINE





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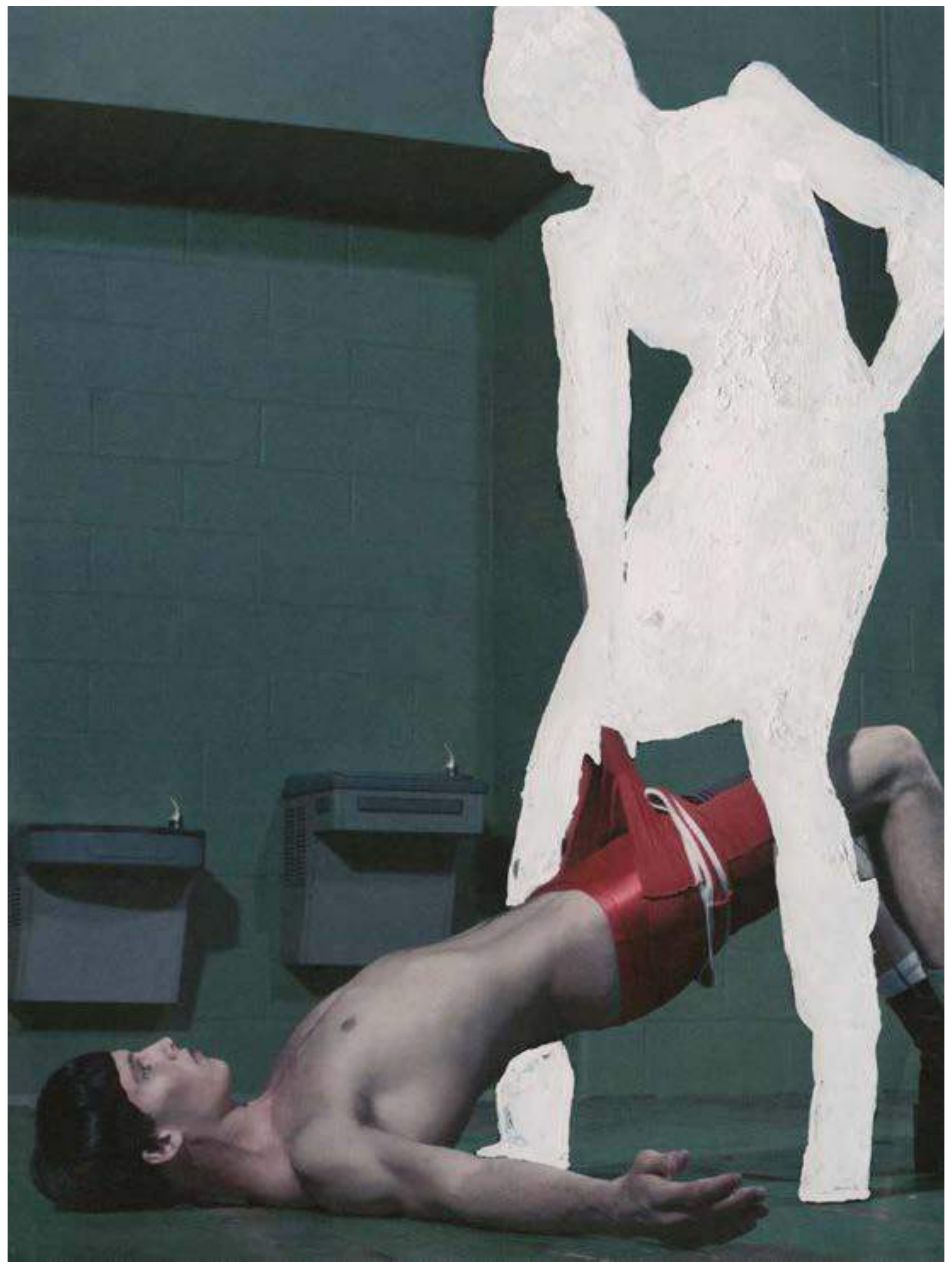

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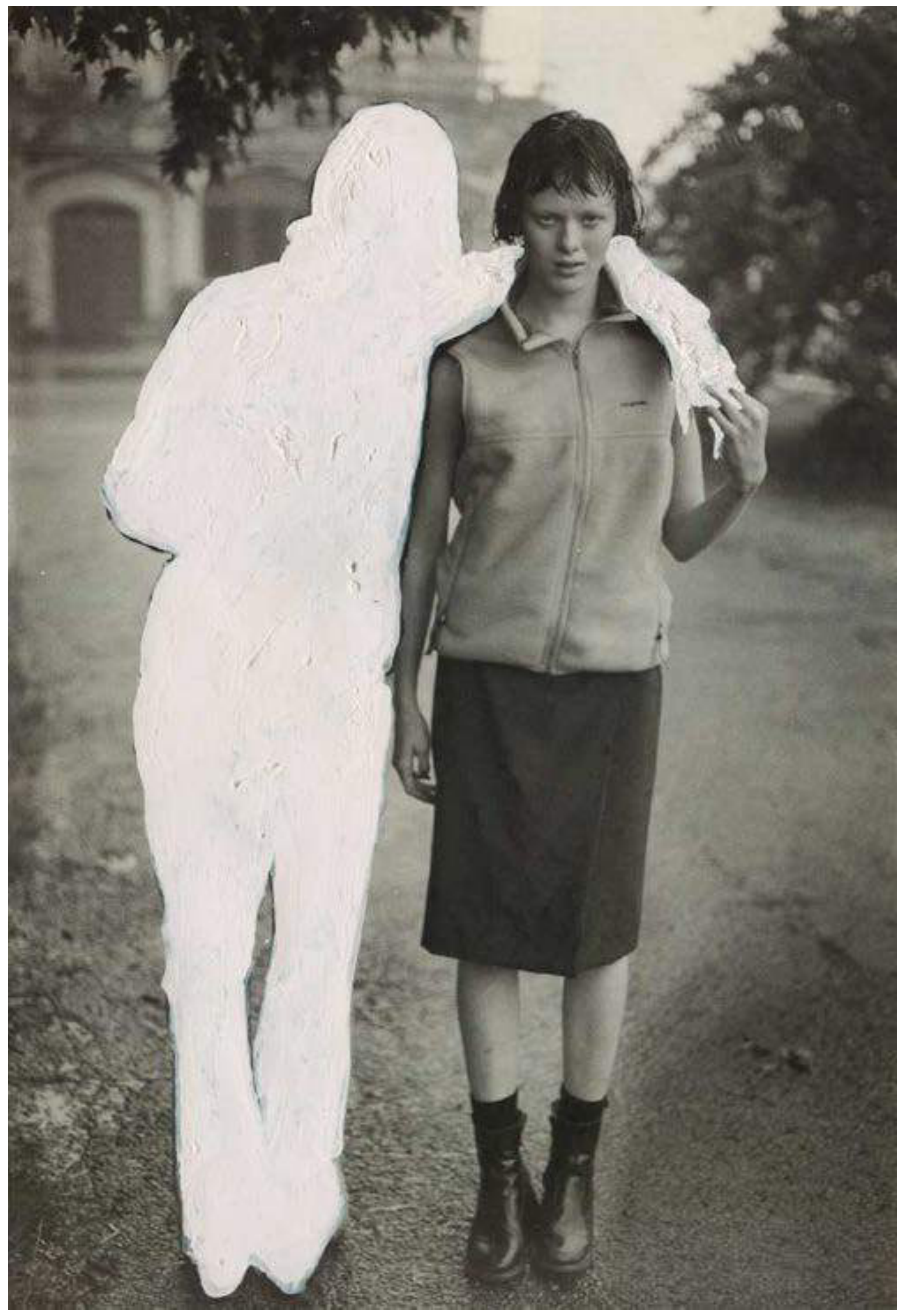

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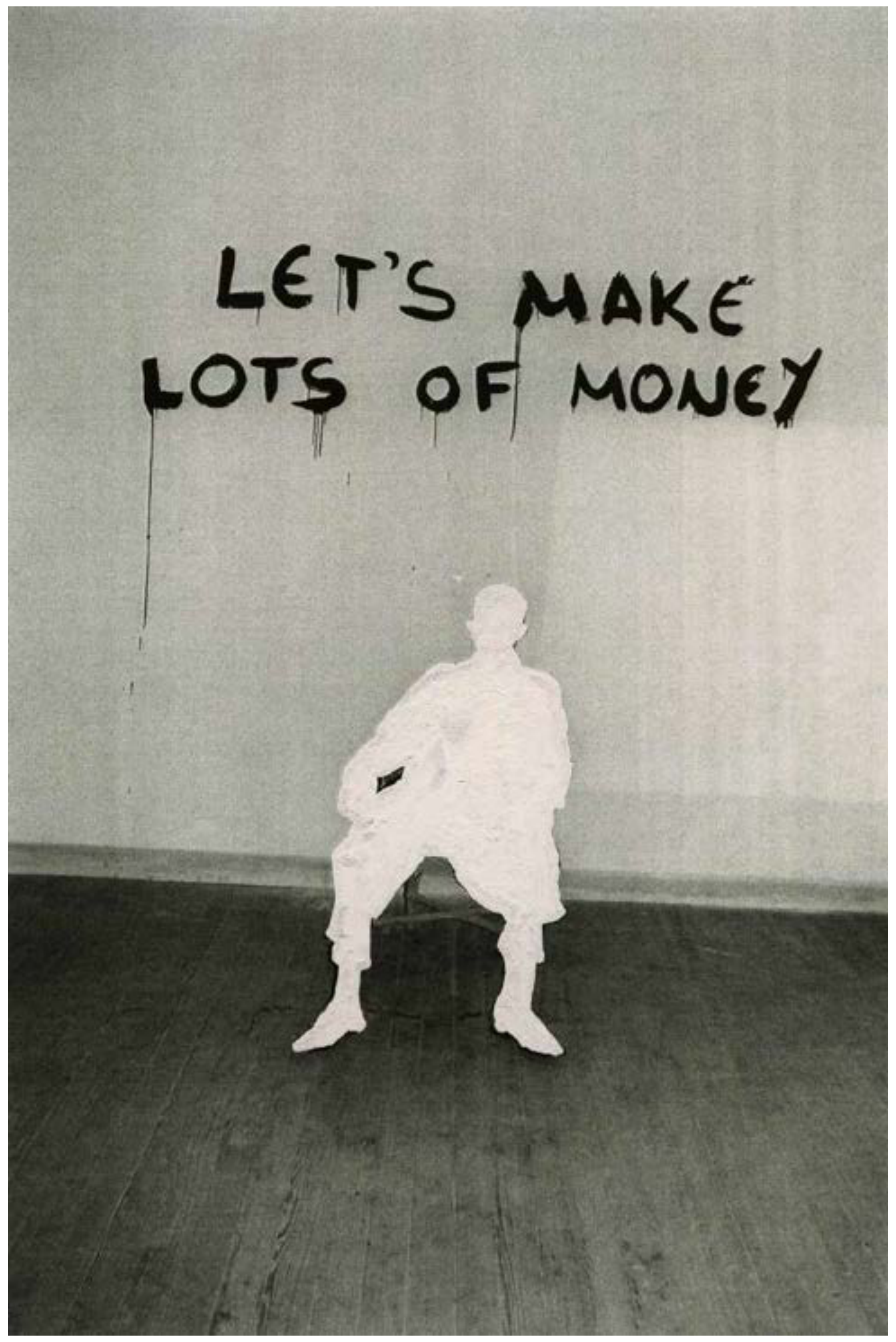
LET'S MAKE
LOTS OF MONEY

WITE-OUT CORRECTION FLUID, PHOTOGRAPH BY JUERGEN TELLER FOR BARNEYS NY

‘The important thing is to make work that is complex and layered.’

A conversation with
Dennis Freedman, 14 May 2020.

Thomas Lenthal: You’re not keen to explain your portfolio, which I think is interesting. You seem to be one of the few creative directors who prefers to keep things a little mysterious.

Dennis Freedman: Yes, but it goes much deeper. It’s pretty fundamental that any creative endeavour, whether it’s a piece of music, a sculpture, a painting, a book, needs to have a life of its own. The best work is open to infinite interpretations. I think anything that is too literal and one-dimensional is not all that interesting.

Thomas: The work you created here certainly possesses the quality of being open to multiple interpretations.

> **‘When I was really young, I would take scissors and do lots of cut-outs, making scenes out of pictures, collages; I’d create my own magical world.’**

Dennis: The important thing is to make work that is complex and layered. That has always been my goal throughout my career. I’m pretty much a classicist; if I go back, even to *W* magazine, there’s always a classical foundation. When we published photographs, the goal was always that they should be accessible so that my mother, say, would get something out of the photograph, but in a completely different way to someone from the fashion world, who might bring other allusions and references to it. My mother might miss some of those specific references and appreciate it purely visually. A work has many dimensions, so it’s important to allow for that. Whether it’s a book, a movie or a dance, the best always require repeated viewings. One of my favourite works of art is Balanchine’s *Serenade*, which is set to Tchaikovsky and something you want to see over and over again, because every time you do, it is always a new experience. Of course, it reflects your own life, and as you age it reveals more; that’s what you aspire to.

Thomas: Well put. That’s a brave position and a rare way of approaching what we do professionally.

Dennis: I was just thinking of a good example of this. One of the things I got most excited about, which kind of explains what I believe is important, had to do with music. I love classical music, and, for me, listening to Wagner can be an overwhelming experience. I remember thinking when I was at *W* that the most difficult, clichéd photographs are of people singing; it doesn’t matter whether it’s the Rolling Stones or Callas, they just tend to be these stock images. I was thinking that I would love to be able to *hear* Wagner in a photograph, to *hear* the music, not just see a person singing. At that time at *W* – and this was the beauty of working there – we were able to experiment, so I called David Sims, as I thought he would be the person who might really relate to this. I said, ‘Dave, I want to do these photographs, but I want to *hear* the music, and that’s not going to be easy.’ So we auditioned three sopranos from the Met. Each one of them came to see us, and they each sang, and we chose the one soprano who we felt was the most expressive. For two days she sang Wagner with an accompanist, and Dave photographed her. For two days! And I remember thinking about the unforgettable portrait that Avedon did of Marian Anderson in 1955.[1] That was the one of the few pictures that I remember being completely entranced by, in which I *did hear* the music. Actually, I heard more than the music; I saw a human being who had struggled with adversity. So with David, we did 18 pages of these extraordinary photographs![2] These really were, for me, one of the things that I felt most proud of. I was very aware that this was not necessarily going to be all that easy to understand, but I really believe that there have to be readers of *W* who walked away from that maybe thinking a little like I did when I saw that Avedon photograph of Marian Anderson.

Thomas: Who maybe heard the music.

Dennis: If they did, that would be kind of sublime. Unfortunately, so much of that is no longer considered important for many reasons, which I think is a huge loss. Anyway, I’m very excited to see this particular project in its entirety because I assume everyone was limited in their resources. I think that limitation is so important for a creative person. When something goes really wrong, that’s always the time when you are most likely to make some sort of breakthrough. It forces you to take a different path, one that you’re not necessarily comfortable with, one that, for a variety of reasons, you would not have considered. That is such an important lesson for everyone. Certainly it gave me a chance to really challenge myself. Especially because of the psychological and emotional state that we’re all in.

Thomas: It always struck me, and a lot of other people this side of the Atlantic, that what you were doing at *W* was incredibly brave. In the sense that you were being ambitious for your readers in a mainstream fashion magazine.

Dennis: Yes, very much mainstream.

Thomas: It was incredibly bold to present a lot of portfolios that you did over the years. What I find interesting is that we’re talking about a magazine based in America mostly for an American audience, at a time when it seemed like the thing to do was to simplify everything. It was the 1990s; everything seemed somehow dumbed down. This was not the most welcoming environment for complexity, yet that was always something you were looking for.

Dennis: There’s this extraordinary misconception, one that’s convenient for our industry, both editors and brands, to think that the public is not ready. What I think is that the editors aren’t ready, some of the brands aren’t ready; some of them can’t think outside their own narrow box. I genuinely believe that it’s much more to do with their lack of vision, lack of curiosity. A lot of times the fashion world is an incredibly parochial world. With *W*, we travelled a lot. I really felt that was important, because it was part of what we were giving to our readers; not literally – we weren’t doing travel pictures – but we were responding to different places in the world. I remember we shot for three days in Rome. There must have been a crew of 20 people, and we were staying in this hotel: photographers, assistants, hair, make-up. Creative people, you would think, curious people. Every day we had to walk past the Pantheon. When we were leaving, I remember asking, ‘What did you think when you walked into the Pantheon?’ I don’t think it was of interest to them. Not one person had bothered to go inside – not one. I think it’s important to realize that we are the ones, in most cases, who can be limited and parochial. We assume that we have to hit people over the heads with the most simplistic material. I think that does a disservice to everyone. I was incredibly lucky because I worked at *W* for 15 years or more; I worked with [editorial director] Patrick McCarthy, and he trusted me. Of course, if we weren’t successful, he would have fired me, but I was lucky because I was never afraid. I always said to photographers, ‘Listen, the reason we’re working together is because I believe in you and your work and what you have to say, so don’t worry if this whole shoot fails. There’s always another chance with the next issue.’ And I think one of the most important things I did was to take away any sense of fear. This really is fundamental. It’s something we really have to think about now.

> **‘Limitation is so important for a creative person. When something goes really wrong, that’s the time when you’re most likely to make a breakthrough.’**

Thomas: What triggered your interest in fashion as a child or a teenager? How did you get interested in it?

Dennis: I came to my job in a very circuitous way. I was an art major and I did studio work, but I knew I was a better editor than I was an artist. I was better at asking the questions than having the answers. I ended up, miraculously, at Fairchild Publications, which was headed by John Fairchild, an unpredictable and complicated man. He took an interest in me because he realized that I loved music, opera, theatre, dance. Somehow, we started talking – we only ever talked about things outside of fashion – and one day he asked me what I was doing for lunch. I don’t even know if I had a job at that point; I may have been a freelancer in the art department. I was doing Xeroxing, I think. He said, ‘Let’s go to lunch.’ So we ended up at his table at the Four Seasons or La Grenouille. We would go to lunch a lot, and never once did we talk about fashion. One day, he said, ‘Dennis I want you to be the features editor of *W*.’ I just said, ‘Mr. Fairchild, I’m not a writer, I’m not an editor.’ He said, ‘No, no, I want you to be the features editor of *W* because you know a good story when you see it.’ He knew that I was curious. So that was it. I had a telephone and a desk, and I think I sat 10 feet apart from him. We all sat in the open space. I just sat there for a month and thought, ‘What am I going to do?’ No one asked me what I was going to do. We didn’t have any meetings. I just sat there for a long time. Then I thought, I am going to start to work with our staff photographers. I didn’t think of myself as having the title creative director, but I knew that my abilities lay there. And one day Mr. Fairchild walked in and said, ‘We’re going to become a consumer magazine.’ Because we couldn’t survive in a newspaper format. It was just at the time [1992] that Fabien [Baron] and Liz Tilberis were coming to *Harper’s Bazaar* and they were going to launch their first issue. No one cared that *W* was also going to publish a magazine. I had no help. It was me and a telephone for almost the first year. I had to do the bookings. I didn't even know what my budget was. There actually wasn't one: either we were going to go out of business or we would get ads to pay for what I would do. What came with that was the opportunity to take the kind of photographs that I valued. That never changed.

'There's this extraordinary misconception – one that's convenient for our industry, both editors and brands – that says the public is not ready.'

Thomas: Which person working within the fashion industry do you most admire?

Dennis: I couldn't pick one person. However, what I will say is that I have been so lucky to work with some of the most extraordinarily brilliant talent. I genuinely mean it, whether it's a make-up artist, a photographer, a designer. On all levels: not just the talent, but the astonishing hard work, the unbelievable dedication and passion; it's extraordinary. That whole ecosystem of photographers, models, hair, make-up, stylists, designers and clothes: it's an incredible team. I don't think the general public realizes that it takes all of that to make it work. There have been many moments where I'm sitting there watching these people creating something that is, in some sense – and I don't mean this in a silly way – enduring. There's one moment I'll never forget. I was doing a shoot in Mississippi with Bruce Weber, the first time I'd ever worked with him. The entire story evolved from a conversation he and I had had about Eudora Welty, who was one of the great American writers.[3] She lived in Mississippi her whole life. Bruce and I discovered that we were both huge admirers of her work, so we basically said, 'OK, there's where we'll go. We'll go to Jackson, Mississippi, we'll take Eudora's portrait, and then explore that part of the South.' It was Martin Luther King Day, and Bruce had read in the local newspaper that one of the grammar schools was having a presentation in the school auditorium about King. He asked the producer to call the school and 'ask if we can come take some pictures'. We meant nothing to them; this was an elementary school in Mississippi. They said, yes, sure. We all just left what we were doing and ran over to this school. They were all preparing for the programme. They were probably 4 years old up to 15. When the performance started, I was in the back of the auditorium. I'll never forget this girl – she was about 14 – who comes out by herself and starts to sing this beautiful song a cappella. It was just her in the light. Then, in the shadows, I could see Bruce on his hands and knees on the steps to the stage with all six of his assistants. He was photographing this beautiful girl singing in a spotlight in a school auditorium. I was sitting in the back thinking, 'Oh my God, this is possible and it's also possible while working for a so-called fashion magazine.' That moment was repeated in different ways throughout those years. I genuinely believe that those were the moments that made *W* a success. It came from an interest in people, in places, in culture, in society; that's how that started. That's how so much of what we did started. There's a huge lesson to learn, especially now, when we really do have to re-evaluate the world we're living in and what, in the end, is meaningful. I think and hope that this particular issue of your magazine will be an important one. These incredibly talented people are going to be forced to work with limited resources – I don't mean money – in terms of materials and what they have to work with. In my case, where I have been living, everything was closed; I only had what was on my bookshelves and, thank God, there was a Staples open. If it weren't for Staples, there would be no portfolio, and thank God they still make Wite-Out. It was incredible to me how much I learned with this whole project. First of all: why is there still Wite-Out? The texture, the tactile aspect of it, and the name itself: 'Wite-Out correction fluid'. I discovered this archaic tool, which really fascinated me; I had to get to the heart of it. The art movement that most influenced me was Arte Povera. For example, the artist Mario Merz used stones, twigs, soil, rocks, and that was enough: 'poor art', common materials. The power and the emotion and the expressiveness of what he created, I find hard to match. It's such a lesson for our world where technology and digital pyrotechnics have erased the human touch. I'm not saying technology is not important – it's vital, I'm the first one to embrace anything that comes along – but what happens is that everybody gets seduced by the technology, so it leads the way. When Silicon Valley exploded, I was, like, 'Jesus Christ, it's all in their hands. We're just holding on and letting it take us wherever it goes.' A lot of that was our fault. You've always got to think, 'How can I use it to do what I have to do?' In so many ways, we have completely lost our way. We've lost the human touch. We've created this incredibly false, perfected world that isn't interesting.

'When Silicon Valley exploded, I was, like, 'Jesus Christ, it's all in their hands. We're just holding on and letting it take us wherever it goes.''

Thomas: I was always in awe of the studio era in Hollywood, where they had enormous constraints and were talking to a huge audience, yet they were able to sneak in so many incredibly complex, sophisticated, twisted, sick, funny things within a package that seemed incredibly easy to access...

Dennis: What made that so extraordinary was that the majority of people who created that idealized world were poor immigrants who escaped Europe, arrived in Hollywood and created imagined worlds. What they made was a kind of comment on glamour, on a world that they could never have experienced. When I was really young, I would take scissors and do lots of cut-outs, making scenes out of pictures, collages; I'd create these worlds out of magazine photographs. It was *my* world, one I was creating in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, in a middle-class Jewish family in the suburbs. And it was magical, in the way that came from my own personal vision. When I decided that maybe I would become an art director, one of the first people I met was Ruth Ansel.[4] I was a student and I went to see Charlie Churchward at *House & Garden* and Ruth was there. I'll never forget it. I walked into the room and I knew who she was. They were putting a cover together, and she turned to me and said, 'What do you think?' I have no idea what I said, but I remember that she asked my opinion and listened. That one thing gave me the false hope that I could actually be a creative director. Long story short, we met again later on in my career, after *W* had launched, and she told me this story. It's a well-known story, but I don't know how many people knew about it. In 1965, she was working with Dick Avedon at *Harper's Bazaar* and they did a cover shoot with Jean Shrimpton. They were on deadline and it was, like, two in the morning, and they had to have the cover done to be shipped that night. Dick hated the hat Jean was wearing – they all hated it – so Ruth got out a pair of scissors and a sheet of hot pink paper, cut out a hole in the centre and put it over Jean's face. It became, and still is, one of the iconic cover images. It was made with a pair of scissors and a sheet of hot pink paper: that was it. Dick Avedon, Ruth Ansel and Bea Feitler, and Jean Shrimpton. Think about that, and now think of everything that goes into a picture of a handbag, and you think, Jesus Christ, what have we done? Where have we gone? How can we have gotten so far and lost so much? To tie it back to where I started on this project, it really was a question of: what resources do I have? After you called me, I was like, 'Are you crazy?' You were talking about fashion brands and portfolios, and I'm thinking, 'Oh my God.' I've been in Long Island for eight weeks, and I only have what's here. It turned out that I have a fair amount of past work here: issues of *W* that go back to 1998 and work that I did at Barneys in 2010. So I sat down, and within half an hour I imagined a photograph from my archive with one of the figures removed. It was my reaction to feeling a sense of loss and loneliness. And then I thought, 'There used to be something called Wite-Out!' I assumed it no longer existed, but then I called Staples. For $4.79…

Thomas: …you can make art!

Dennis: I learned so much as I was doing it. I worked on many images: some resonated when I blotted out the figure, some didn't. Each one worked in a different way. Or, at least, each one said something different to me. It was an extremely powerful and emotional exercise.

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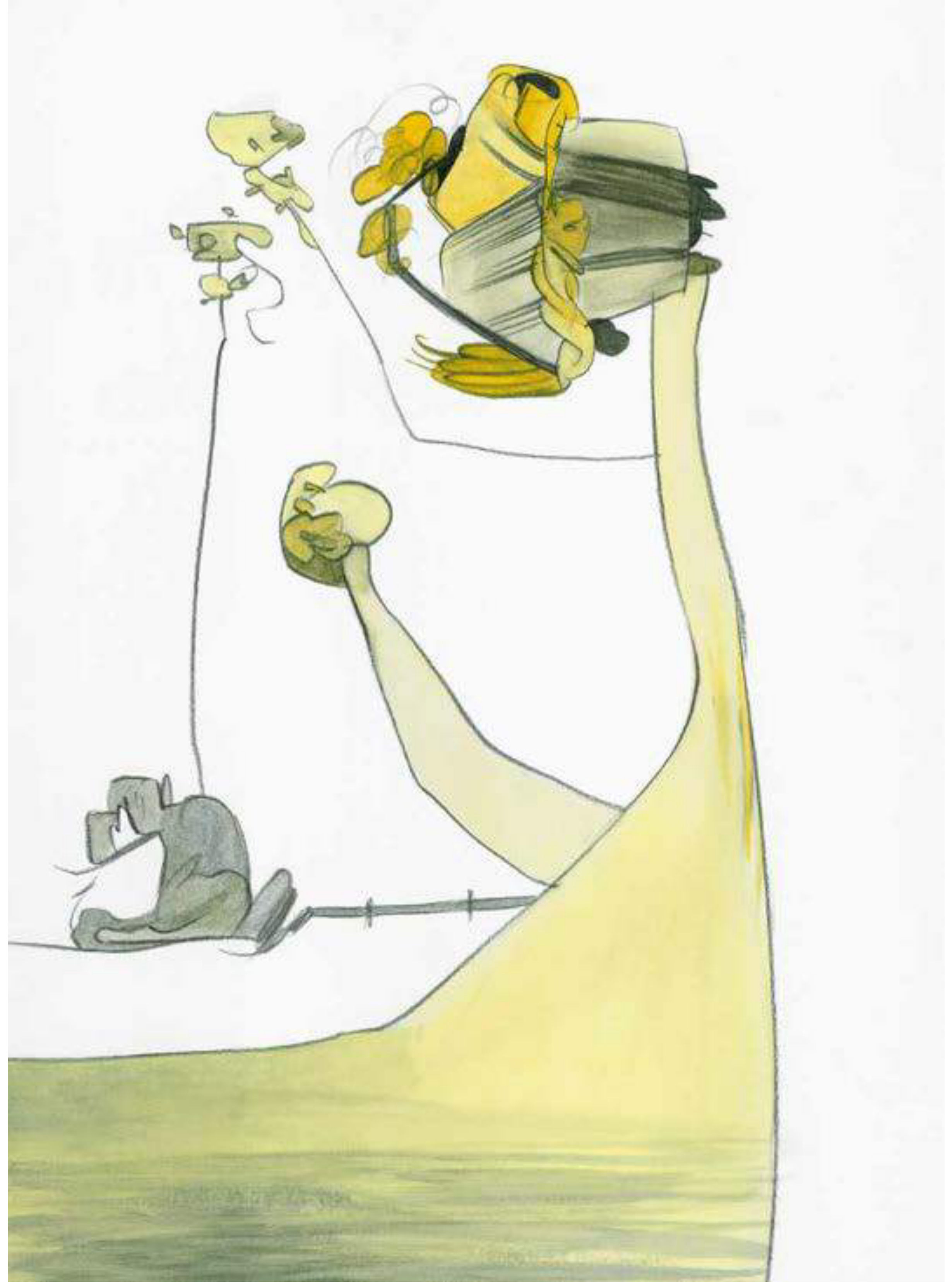
1. On 7 January 1955, contralto Marian Anderson (1897-1993) became the first African-American to perform at the New York Metropolitan Opera. She sang Ulrica, in Verdi's *Un ballo in maschera*, which she reprised for Avedon's photograph, taken in June 1955. The image was published in *Harper's Bazaar* in November of the same year.

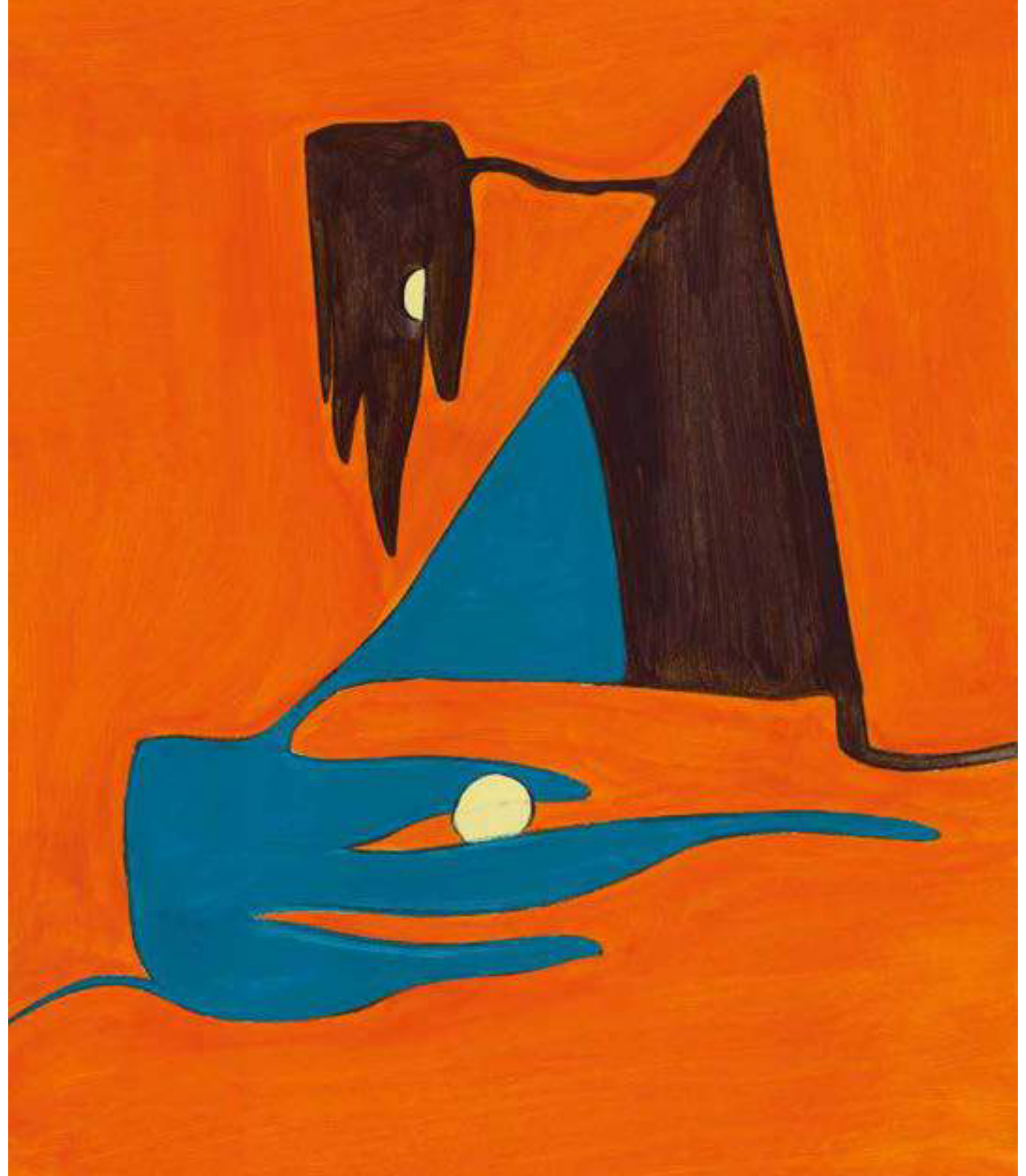
2. The story, entitled 'Aria', was published in the February 2009 issue of *W*. It featured French-Canadian soprano Alexandra Deshorties singing roles including Violetta in *La Traviata* and Donna Anna in *Don Giovanni* while wearing dresses by the likes of Ralph Lauren, Yves Saint Laurent, Prada and Giorgio Armani.

3. Eudora Welty (1909-2001) was a novelist, short-story writer and photographer, who was born and spent much of her life in Jackson, Mississippi. Her writing primarily dealt with life in the small towns of the South and the Mississippi Delta. She won the 1972 Pulitzer Prize for her novel, *The Optimist's Daughter*.

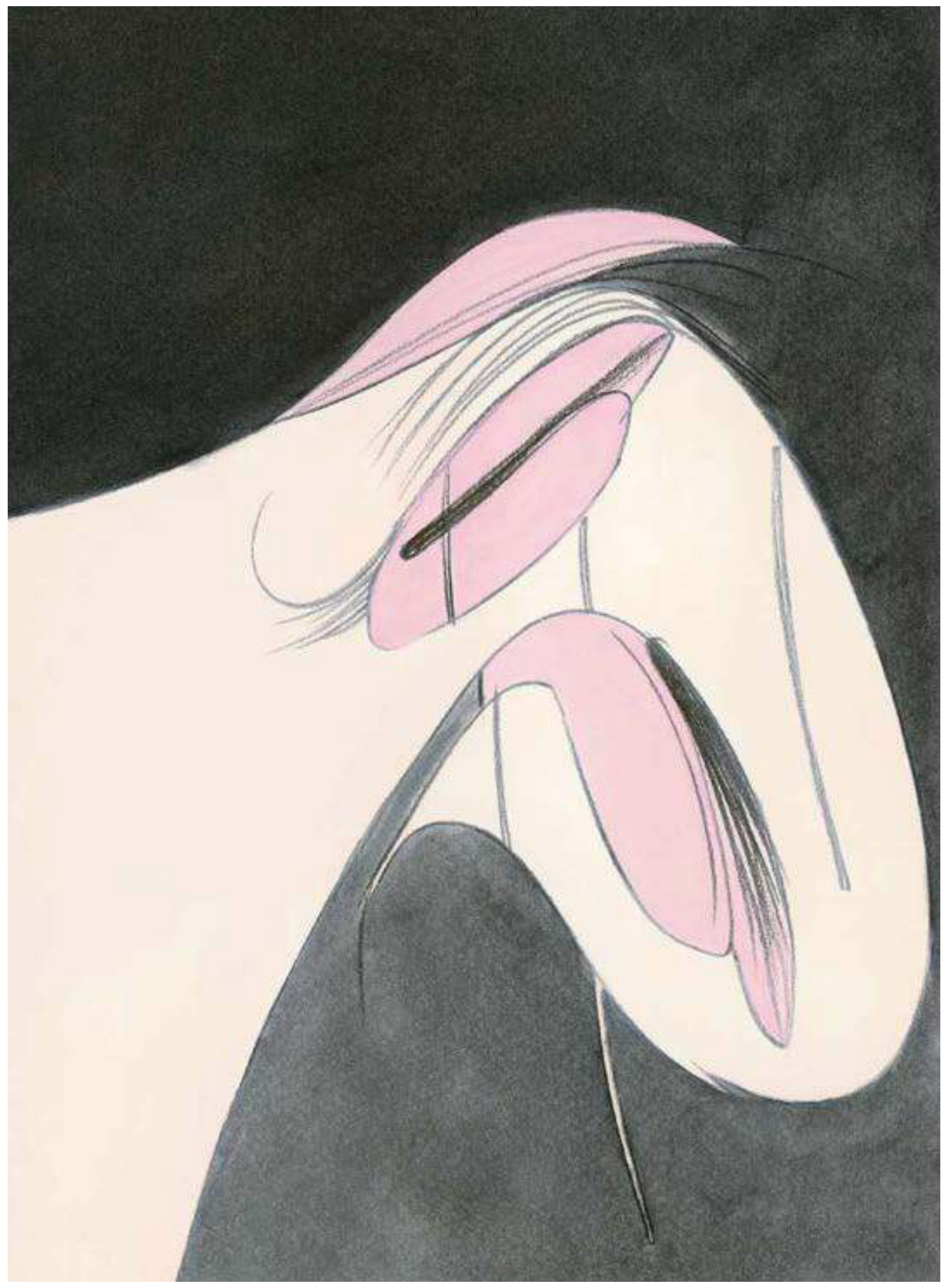
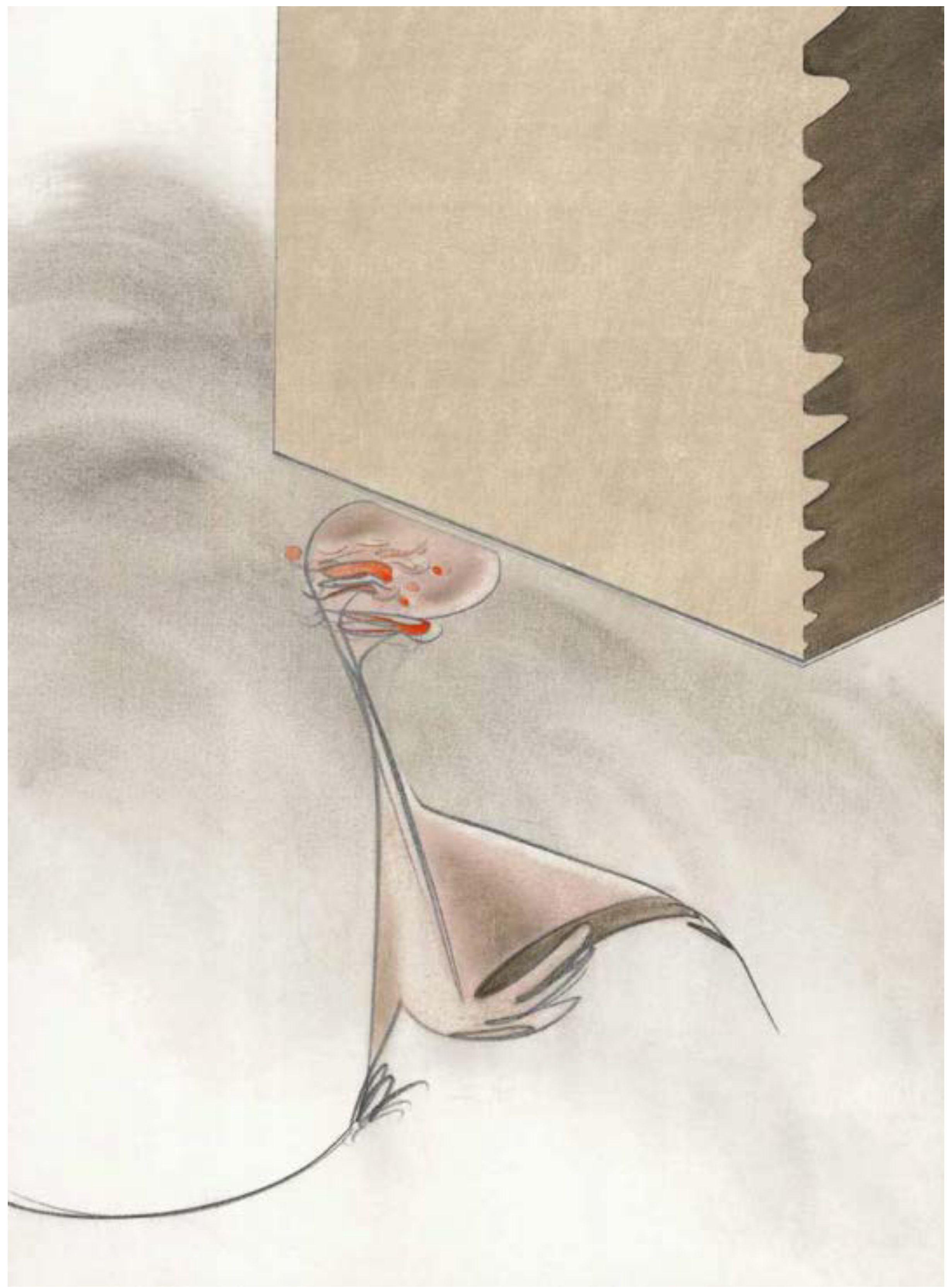
4. Ruth Ansel was appointed art director of *Harper's Bazaar* in 1963 (with Bea Feitler), the *New York Times Magazine* in 1974 and *Vanity Fair* in 1984. In each role her pioneering conceptual, yet pop vision of design was allied to long-term collaborations with photographers including Richard Avedon, Diane Arbus and Tim Walker.

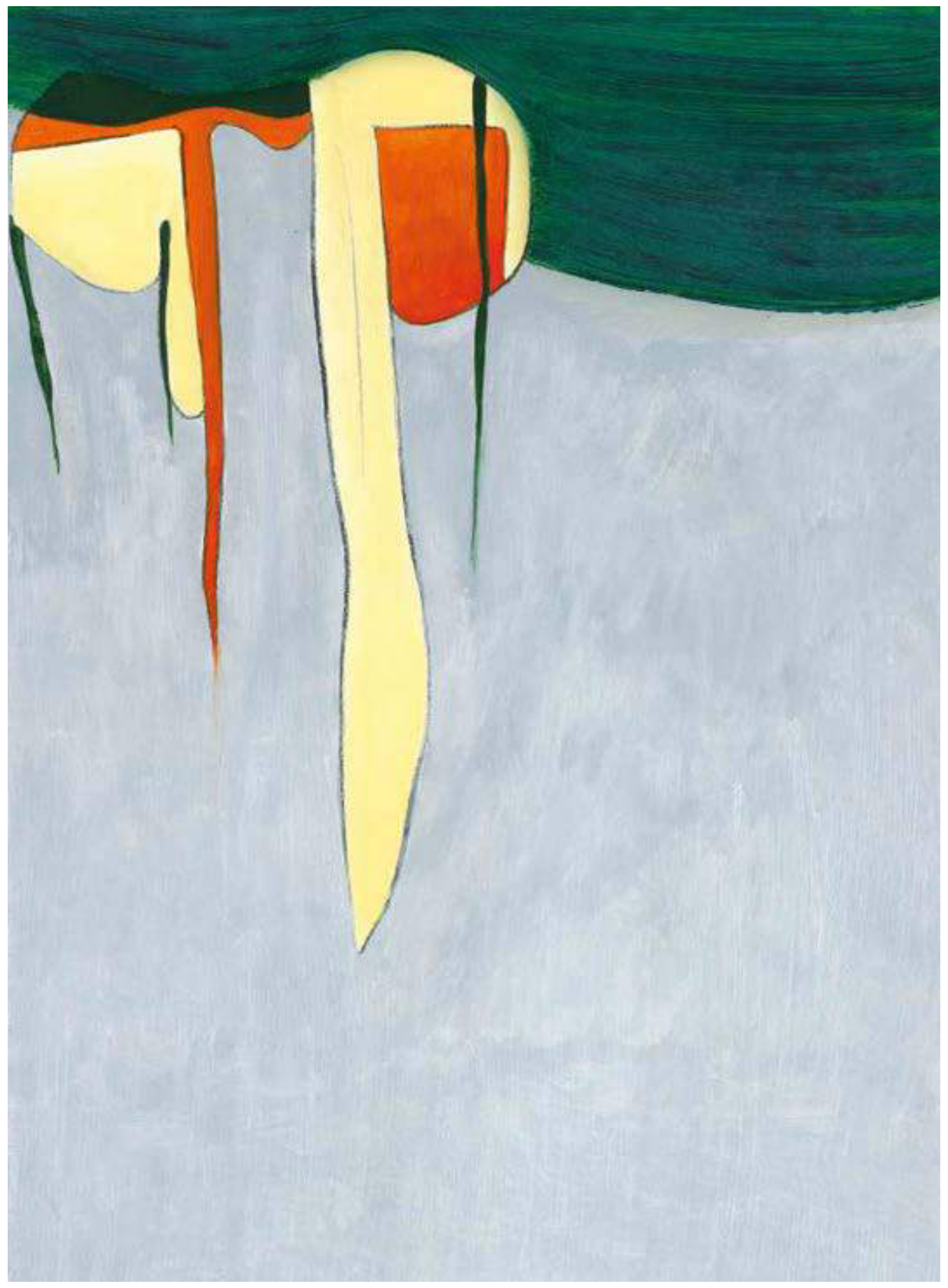


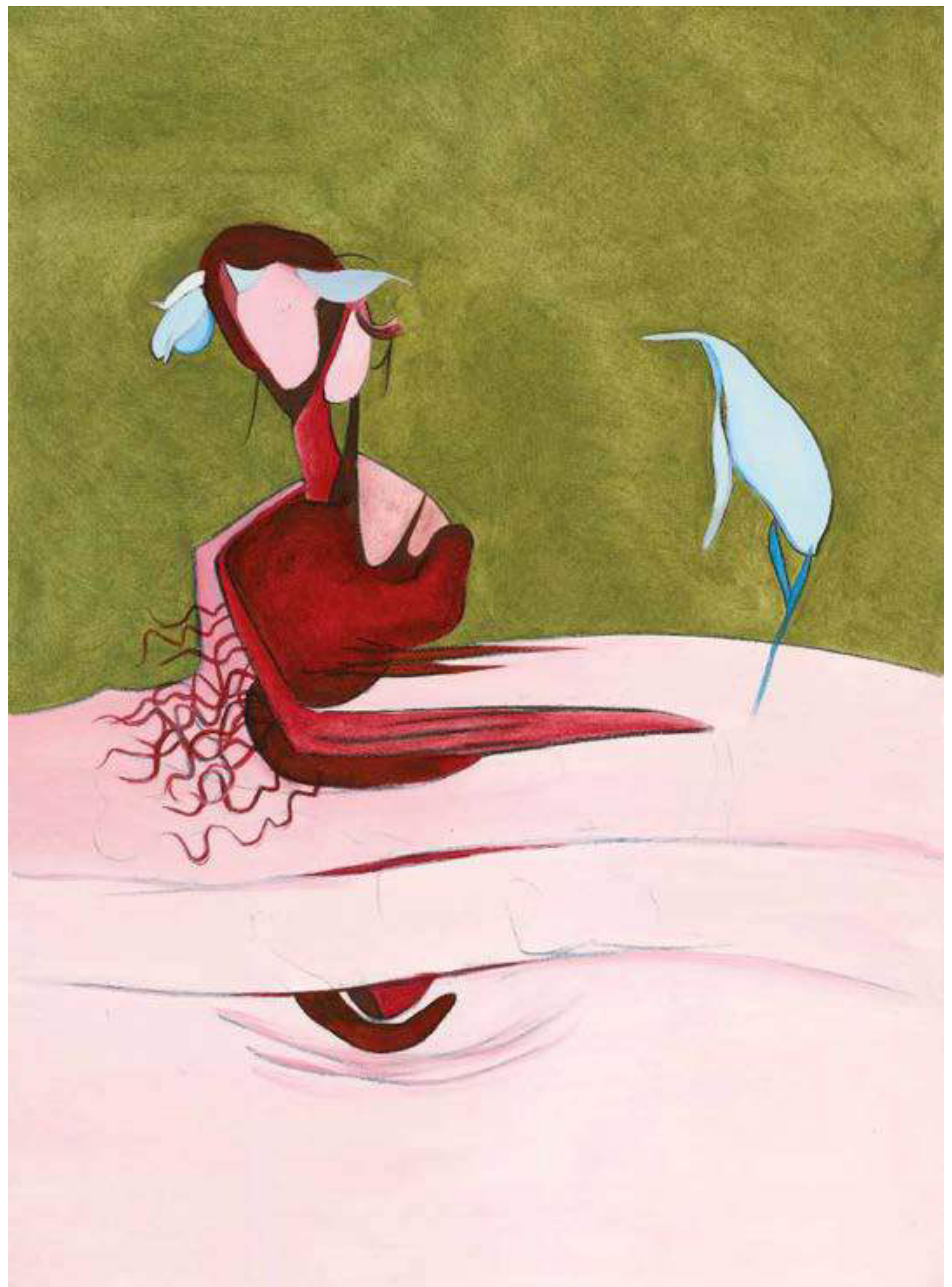
Mnemosyne. David James

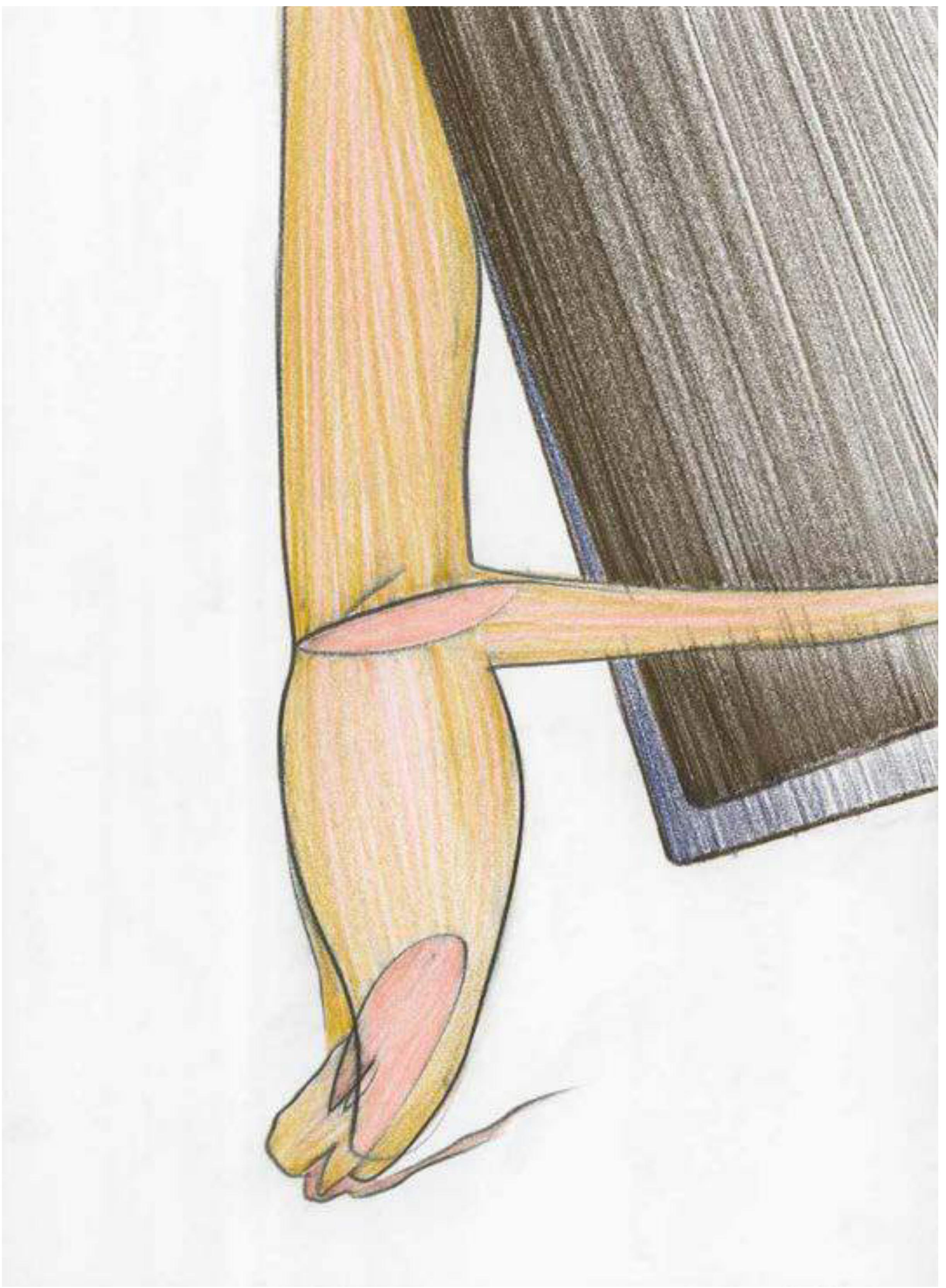


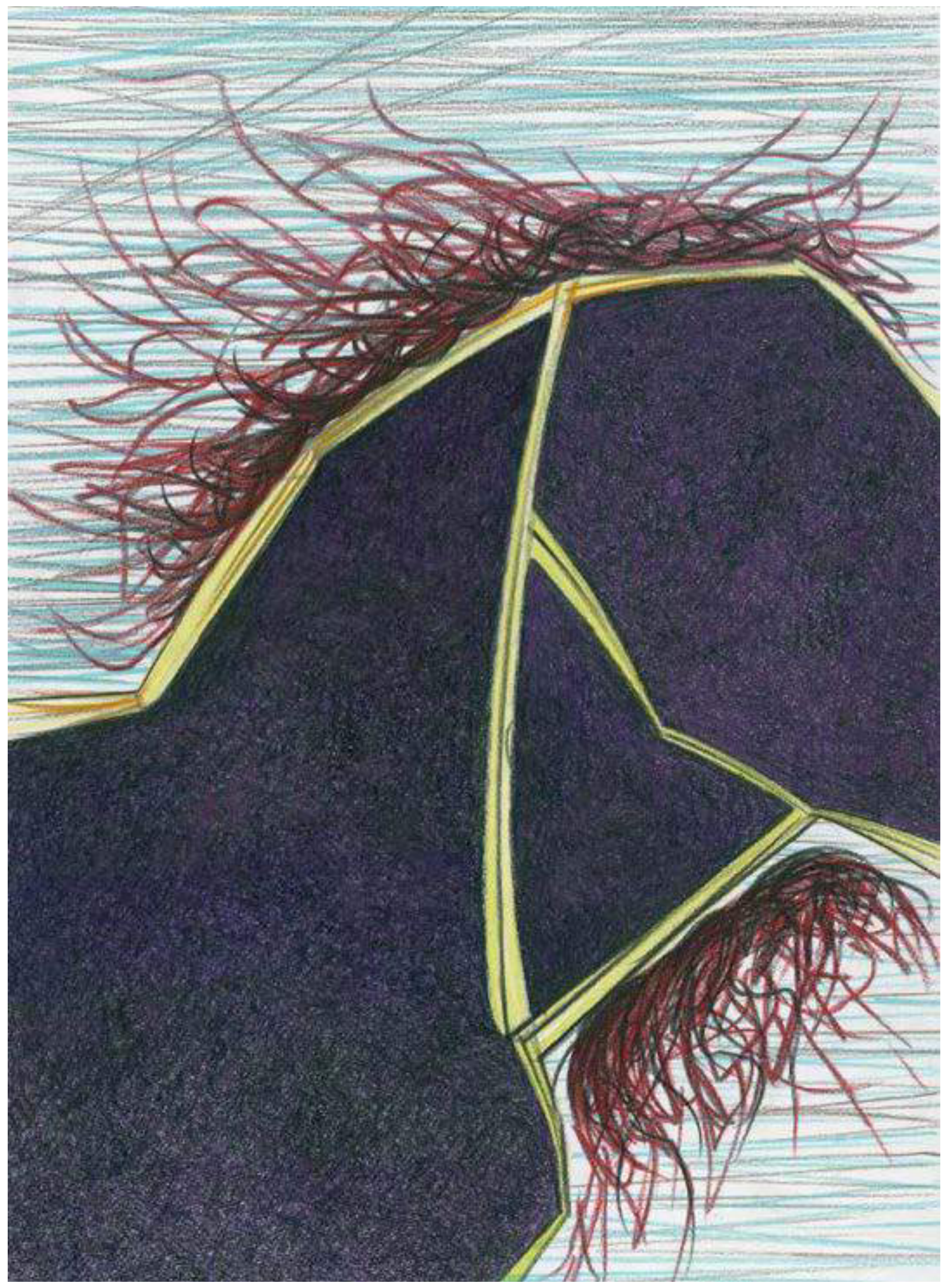
Central Saint Martins Autumn/Winter 2020 / Jawara Alleyne / Alexandra Armata / Ella Boucht / Joshua Crabtree
Leeann Huang / Sun Mu Lee / Saskia Lenaerts / Aleksandar Mitrovic / Gui Rosa / Alex Wolfe / Ding Yun Zhang
Artworks: oil paint, gesso, pencil and coloured pencil on paper.

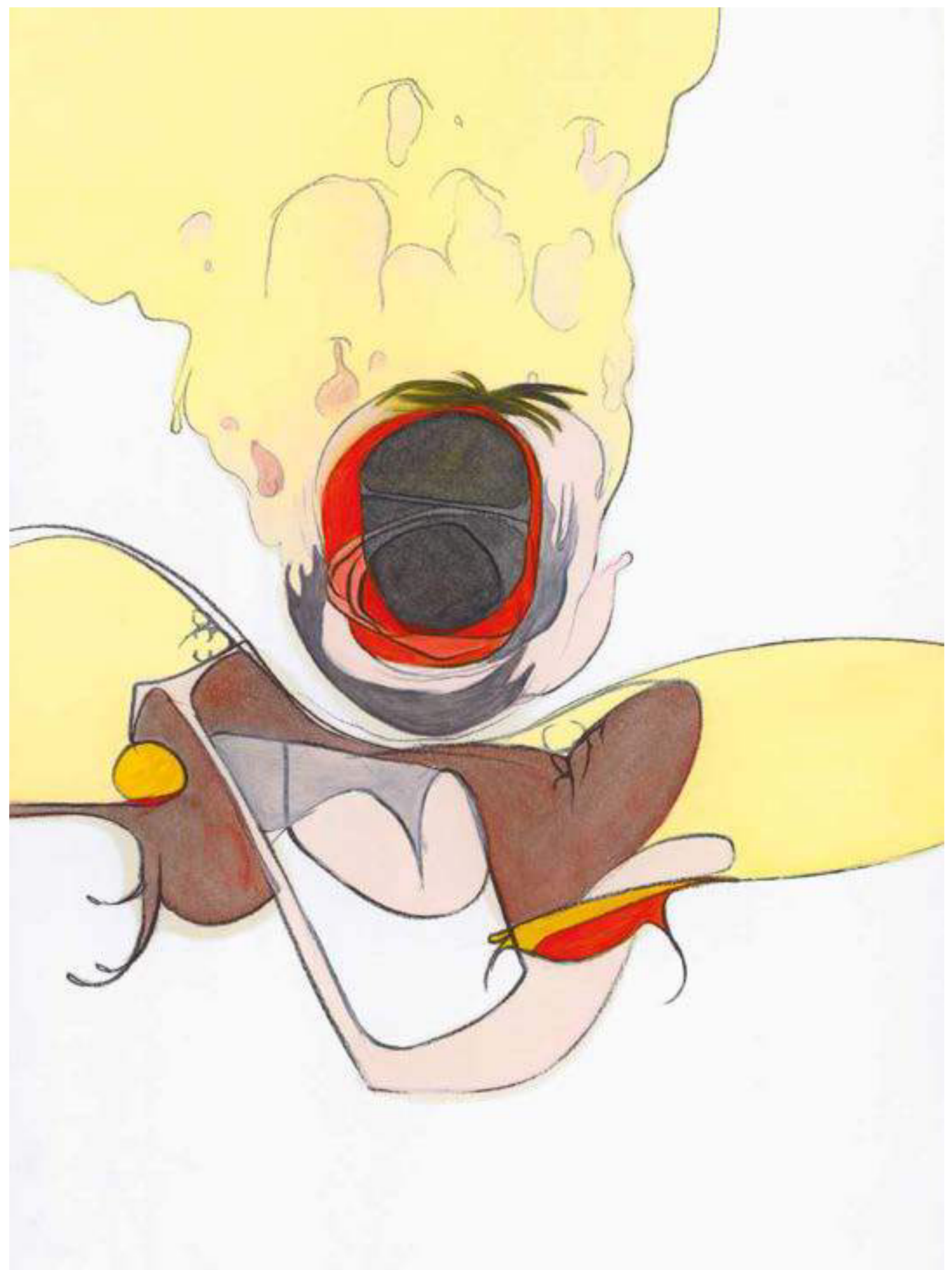



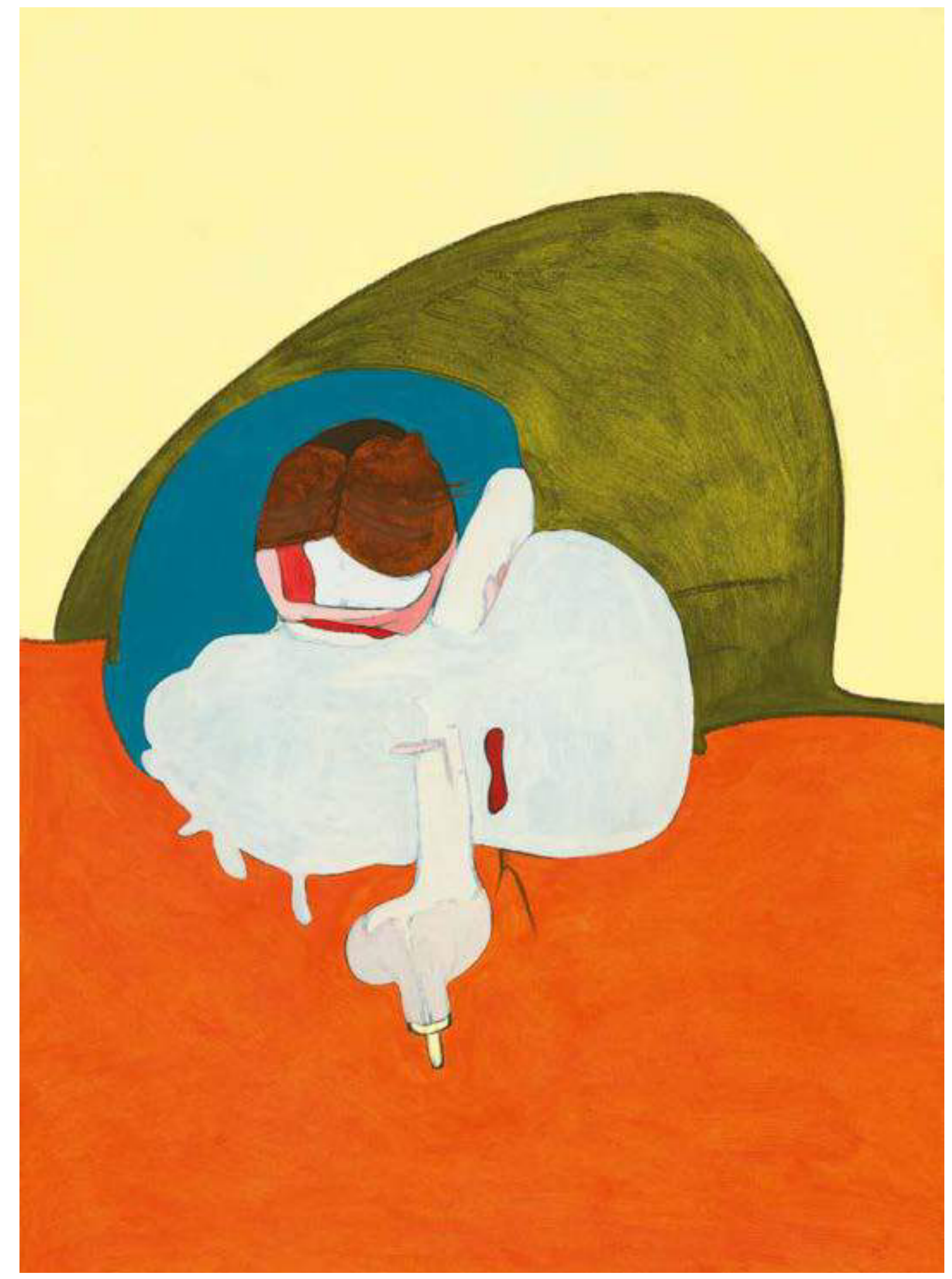


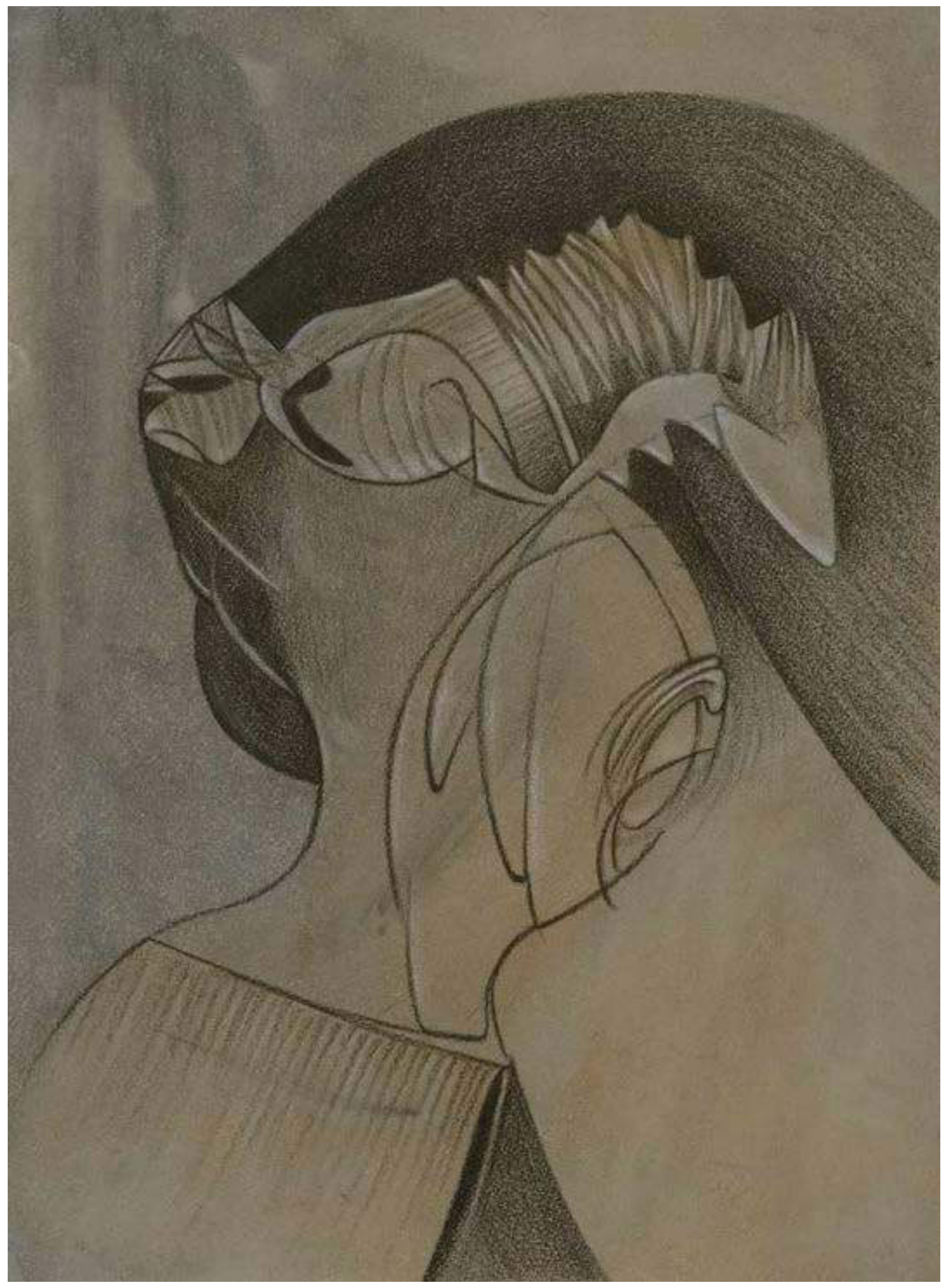


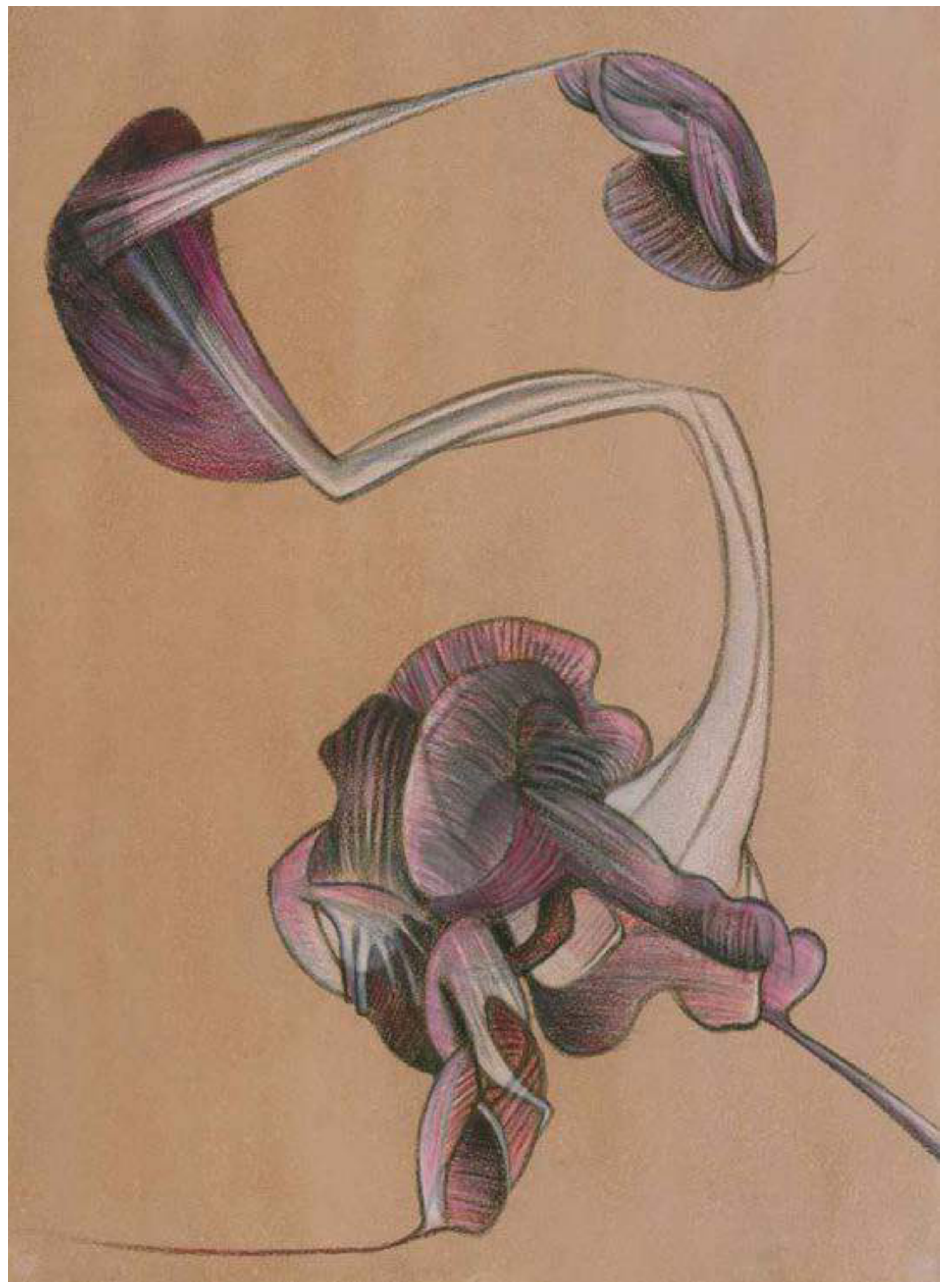












‘The fashion itself needs to have certain qualities that can inspire the image-makers, the stylists, the photographers.’

A conversation with David James, 8 May 2020.

Thomas Lenthal: Thank you so much for producing something that feels so personal and intimate. I was very touched, and I found it captivating.

David James: It’s an interesting one. I’ve been busy with my art practice for the last 10 or 12 years, but I only started showing the work in the past three. The drawing practice is quite developed now, and I’m working on a series of paintings. I do automatic drawings all the time; I never really have any references. This was kind of interesting because I didn’t really deviate too much, other than doing my homework, doing some research, looking at all the shows, seeing what caught my attention. And what did was the full Saint Martins show. It was very accomplished, and I thought it was the right moment to focus on a new generation of designers. Somehow everything I saw in that show – all the colours, the forms, the shapes, the ideas, the casting – it all just fitted for me. This moment in time felt like a good moment to champion the up-and-coming generation. They seemed to be very tuned in to what’s going on in the wider world. I always work off intuition and instinct – that’s all we really have – and it’s the same with my drawing practice; it’s purely intuitive. There is no thinking going on; it’s an act. I just create drawings. I don’t know what I’m doing when I do them. They can be very abstract or very figurative. I took it all in and then made the drawings. I made a note of the colour palette, all the forms, general impressions, and then put it to one side and started making the drawings. I went back to it to look at the colour, and then I just got on with it. That’s how they came out. They’re sort of semi-figurative, kind of abstract. That was my intention; I didn’t want to do anything literal. I could have done, because I do paint and draw figuratively, but I felt that might stray into illustration – literal fashion illustration – which wasn’t my intention. It was more about creating a mood or a feeling connected to everything I absorbed when looking at the work of the students.

Thomas: They really felt like totems; you know, strange monsters somehow. This notion of combining this way of looking with fashion feels not just novel, but unheard of.

David: It’s interesting you say they’re totemic, because I do a lot of abstract drawings that to me are all three-dimensional. It’s like drawing sculptures. Quite a bit of my work actually looks like that, so there are different elements of my art practice in this: fabricating, painting, drawing and, indeed, sculpting elements. In fact, one of the projects is to make some of my other work into three-dimensional objects.

Thomas: They seem to be begging for that. And it was also, to me, really English. It reminded me of Henry Moore and Francis Bacon, obviously.

David: I’m a huge fan of Bacon and I admire Henry Moore a lot; that’s not too much of a surprise. I don’t really think about those artists, though. When I’m doing these automatic drawings, that doesn’t come up. These drawings are done incredibly quickly; I really do them without thinking. They don’t all work, so for every one drawing, I might do seven or eight. In that sense, it’s all very spontaneous, very impulsive. I start with the drawings, all done first with pencil, and then some of them are painted with oil paints, and some are drawn with coloured pencils, crayons. I work with all media: acrylic, oil pastels, chalks, oils. In some of my work, I use a lot of resin and hair.

Thomas: Is restriction itself a useful or necessary thing when it comes to creative work?

David: For my art practice, there can’t be any restrictions. But as a creative director, restrictions are fine, as long as they are not stifling creatively; they should be parameters. In the editorial or design realm, that’s actually quite important, because we’re usually working with a client’s vision, and they can be really good. Restrictions can be stifling when you’re not asked to be creative, or when your creativity is taken away. As you will know very well, you can find yourself in a situation where there is an incredible brief, and as you go through the process, the creative execution gets whittled down until it becomes a hollow shell. That’s really depressing. I’ve been fortunate in that I’ve been able to work with lots of really inspiring people and clients. It’s not been without its difficulties, but I find it very rewarding when there is an impetus to create great work, and a momentum behind that, a belief.

‘The rebelliousness and energy of punk were really appealing to me as a 14-year-old. And I think that has always kind of stayed with me.’

‘I’m challenged by images that make me think, ‘Why am I reacting so negatively against that?’ It must be because it’s saying something new.’

Thomas: I always think about it as an honest conversation with whoever you’re dealing. Things turn sour when the conversation becomes dishonest, on both sides, when no one is interested in saying anything meaningful.

David: I have a bit of a sixth sense for that, and I tend to back off and not get involved if it’s like that. I’ve never really enjoyed doing things for the money, and have rarely done so. I think that’s typical of our generation. When we started out, it was very much about the creative work: what you could do, how you could express yourself. It was never about the money. There was always a passion about what you could do creatively. Maybe that’s different today. Back then, of course – and I’m going back to the late-1980s, early-1990s – the fashion industry was a small place for creative work. I started out doing record sleeves and that kind of evolved into doing fashion projects. It gathered momentum in the 1990s, but of course even back then there wasn’t this complexity of media to work with; there were just a couple of basic things. It’s become a very different industry. I’ve seen a lot of people along the way who were just in it for the lifestyle, not for the work. It seems like a fun or glamorous thing to do, but I’ve been around a minute, so I can usually sense when somebody is not serious about the work. You can tell. Sometimes you get a brief and you look at the brand and you say, ‘Well, that’s never going to happen.’ I’ve seen that even more in recent years: middle management trying to impress decision-makers internally, trying to make themselves look good, and just not really understanding the brand they work for.

Thomas: For sure. I sympathize with that. What to you is a good fashion image, and has this remained the same throughout your career?

David: That’s a good question; a tricky one, isn’t it? For me, I want to feel like I’m seeing something fresh and new, like I am seeing something for the first time. Fundamentally, that’s what I always want to see. I want to have an initial reaction or response to it. Now, that could be really good or really bad, because sometimes, certainly, I’ve been very challenged by images that have really made me think, ‘Why am I reacting so negatively against that? It must be because it’s doing and saying something new. It’s hitting me and affecting my nervous system in some way.’ Sometimes it takes a while to make that decision: is this something or is it just really bad? It’s the same with art.

Thomas: It seems to me that the ‘shock of the new’ used to happen more often with the clothes themselves, somehow. The translation into fashion photography came about – I don’t know why – in a way that felt a little smoother and a little more seductive. I can’t think of any fashion imagery to which my first feeling was: ‘This is repulsive, but I should look into it a bit more.’ I don’t know if I’ve ever been startled or puzzled by fashion imagery, to be perfectly honest. But I’d be interested to understand better what experience you are referring to.

David: When I first saw Wolfgang Tillmans’ work in *i-D*, that really threw me.

Thomas: But he’s not a fashion photographer. He can act in the fashion context, but he’s obviously got a different agenda.

David: I know, but back then I didn’t really know that, and he was working for various publications. His work really hit me and really shocked me: like, that doesn’t look like a fashion image I’m used to seeing, that’s pressing some buttons. It challenged my notions of the fashion image, and I realized that that was kind of a great thing. It’s true that that was at the very beginning of his career and he then went on to work exclusively as an artist and rightly so, because his vision was personal and outside of any design or commercial considerations. When I want to see something new and fresh, it’s not always to be shocked, necessarily, but just to feel like I’m seeing an evolution within the industry, of imagery or a new sensibility or feeling. Of course, those have come about over time with certain photographers or image-makers, but what you were saying before is true: there first needs to be a kind of spark or inspiration that comes from the fashion itself. It needs to have certain qualities that can inspire the image-makers, the stylists, the photographers and designers. Sometimes those sorts of things are outside of fashion, aren’t they? I’m just thinking back to the grunge period, for example. We keep talking about things back in the 1990s…

Thomas: Back then, one of the factors that could sometimes be aesthetically unsettling was the choice of models. The 1990s was such an interesting time, when Steven Meisel would decide that a girl was worthy of being on the cover of Italian *Vogue*, and you’d think, ‘What?’ That was aesthetically challenging, yet when I think about fashion photography, I feel that it always has an element of immediate seduction to it. What could be unsettling is the styling, the model, the hair, the make-up, but the image itself, somehow, always remains in a very conventional frame.

David: I feel you're right. The fact is, the 1990s were an incredibly productive, highly creative time. There were so many different voices, so many photographers, stylists, people doing very individual, very interesting things. There was an explosion of talent and ideas and it was a very fertile and rich period. It doesn't seem to have been so since. That might just be my perception, because I'm looking back in a nostalgic way. Of course, when you're in it, it's often quite hard to see the bigger picture, but when I look back I realize that it really was an incredible moment for fashion and fashion photography and image-making. Now there are just hundreds of magazines, thousands of image-makers, so much stuff, even more now with digital media. It's frankly very, very repetitive and a lot of it washes over me. I often get asked for advice by photographers who are starting out, and I say, 'Save up, take a year out, find out who you are and what you want to say, and don't start taking fashion pictures until you are clear about that. Otherwise, you'll just become a jobbing photographer with no point of view.' That's what I see a lot of: imagery with no aesthetic or fashion point of view.

'Sometimes you get a brief and then you look at the brand and you say to yourself, 'Well, that's just never going to happen."

Thomas: Tell me then, what is a good fashion photograph?

David: In principle, it should always be an expression of fashion: the casting, the type of picture, and saying something new about fashion from a cultural point of view. What makes it really interesting right now? Maybe we've just reached saturation point. The industry has been speaking about this a lot, about the volume of shows, the volume of products, the volume of everything. It creates an incredible amount of anxiety, and it doesn't seem to be a great environment for creating the kinds of things we feel we are missing. It's overwhelming for everybody.

Thomas: I was speaking to another English creative director and he pointed out that in the 1990s a fashion story could be 8, 12, 14 pages; a 16-page fashion story was absolutely humongous. Now, in magazines – and I plead guilty – you have fashion stories that could go on for 60, 70, 100 pages, almost mirroring the inflation of contemporary fashion.

David: With those stories, you could make an edit and narrow it down to a handful of images. Sometimes, I look through magazines and I think, are they just filling up space? I see a magazine that's 10 centimetres thick, and I think, what's going on here? I can't even get through them. We were talking about a time when editorially there actually weren't so many credits to tick off. That has played a huge part in the commercial reality of magazines; advertisers have become very demanding about the credit list they expect. You end up with telephone-book-style magazines, because of those obligations. That doesn't make for a great issue, sometimes, because you end up with 30 pages of uninteresting credits.

Thomas: Or maybe the format itself has become slightly absurd. A magazine is not supposed to be 600 pages long. Was there a defining image, reference, person or moment from your teenage years that you now look back on as instrumental in moving you towards a career in fashion, and art direction in particular?

David: I think it started through music when I was about eight years old. I believe it was a Led Zeppelin record that caught my attention. I became aware of the way people were dressing, and the suedeheads and skinheads. I remember asking my sister if there were any pop bands that dressed like those people. At that time, there was a band in England called Slade who did look like that, until they became super glam rock. So that was my first connection between music and fashion. The most striking example for me was when punk happened. I was 14 or 15, and it was an incredible moment to witness and experience. The rule books were ripped up. There was this idea that you could do anything yourself; you didn't need to be practised or skilful, you just needed to get on with it and do it. The rebelliousness and energy were really appealing to me at that age. I think that has kind of stayed with me. I was very fortunate to inherit a technical artistic ability: I can draw, I can paint. My parents saw that in me very early, and encouraged me. I kind of knew by the age of 10 or 11 that I was going to have a career in art in some way. When I was 15 or 16, I was living in Manchester and very interested in the music culture of the time: Joy Division, for example. When I looked at the work that Peter Saville was doing, at those record sleeves, I thought it was incredible that a record sleeve could look like that – and that this could be a medium I could work in. So that's exactly what I went on to do. When I started working for myself, I began doing record sleeves, and my interest in fashion came through music. It always did. The late 1970s was an incredible time to be interested in music because everything was completely turned upside down and changed, with punk, and then new wave. The look that Joy Division had was kind of incredible.

'You often circle back to your initial idea. That circle used to be really big, but over time, you gain confidence in your instinct and it becomes small.'

Thomas: Can you give an example of what's most intuitive for you in your work and what you tend to overthink?

David: What do I tend to overthink? Everything! This is a really interesting question, because in my art practice I do exactly the opposite. I really set out not to think; it's about doing. That has always been a goal of mine, not to overthink things. That's quite challenging. When you are given a brief for something you have to do a lot of thinking, you have to do a lot of homework, a lot of research. That's where the overthinking can come in, because you can get a bit too overanalytical. Sometimes it's necessary, but it really depends. In the end, really, I've always been good with my intuition.

Thomas: You circle back to your initial idea.

David: That circle used to be really big, but over time, you gain confidence in your intuition and your instinct and it becomes very small. Nine times out of 10, my decision-making is ultimately just based on my intuition. It has to be, even if I'll still do a lot of preparatory research. I like first to understand the brand, the designer or the culture in some way, so I can get the measure of a project. Then I can make a more informed intuitive decision. Within my art practice, my studio is literally a laboratory. I just do experiments and the work will take me somewhere. Your subconscious is always going to tell you, intuitively and instinctively, that this is right and this is wrong; that it does or doesn't accord with how you feel about what you're trying to do. Sometimes I don't even have an idea about what I'm trying to do, and it's better that I don't. It's better to have an inspiration, a spark, and to see where it goes.

Thomas: In your commercial work, do you want to appeal to niche in-the-know audiences, or a wider demographic?

David: I'm easy either way, because there's a creative challenge either way. It's about how exciting the intention is from the client or brand. For me, it's always really exciting when there is an idea to try and do something, even if it's very commercial. Like I said earlier, sometimes you just know with a certain brief or brand that that's never going to be possible. And in that case, don't do it.

Thomas: What does success look like for you?

David: Success has always been to feel that something has really hit the mark creatively. That doesn't always happen, but that's always the intention. In the end, I want to get it right for the client, but I want to get it right for me, because if I'm getting it right for me, then I'm getting it right for the client.

Thomas: Excellent answer. Describe a professional disappointment and what you learned from it.

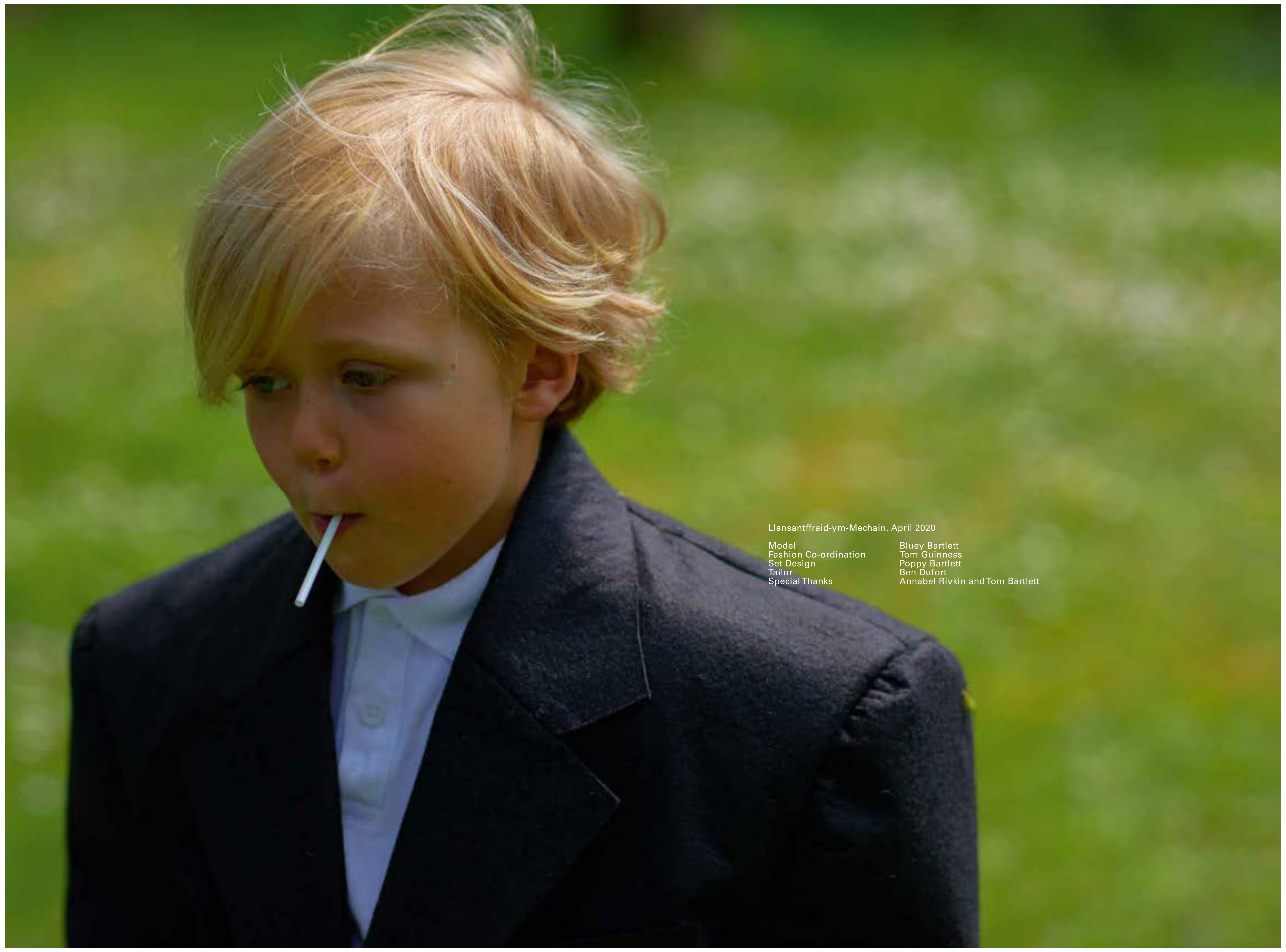
David: There haven't been too many that I didn't see coming and couldn't plan for. It boils down to the human, a clash of personalities and an inability to understand one another. The worst is when people are operating through fear; then it's impossible to do things. It has become more typical in recent years that decision-making is based on a fear of not pleasing somebody higher up or a fear of failing. It's not done in the spirit of confidence, and that's a big problem. When you look at the great things that are happening, they're done in the spirit of great confidence and vision. You can sense it. It has an energy; it has an aura, just like people do.

Thomas: As things hopefully return to some level of normality, will your impulse be to explore notions of fantasy and escazpism or will you be more inclined to double-down on realism?

David: It's all fantasy, in the end. There is always a need for fantasy. I like both polarities. It's really about what feels right in the moment. What I care about is whether people want to say or do something creatively. Whichever direction that goes in, whether it goes into fantasy or into realism, that's fine. But how are we going to push it? How are we going to make that relevant to now? What are we excited about here? What do we hope to achieve with this, and why? I always like the questioning, but I like the answer to be something inspiring, something new, something exciting – something incredibly creative.

Bluey

Bluey, A Portfolio
Ben Kelway



Llansantffraid-ym-Mechain, April 2020

Model	Bluey Bartlett
Fashion Co-ordination	Tom Guinness
Set Design	Poppy Bartlett
Tailor	Ben Dufort
Special Thanks	Annabel Rivkin and Tom Bartlett

‘I suppose there’s an element of control to art direction – which is probably why I ended up doing it!’

A conversation with Ben Kelway,
1 May 2020.

Thomas Lenthal: Thank you for this portfolio. Is that your son in the images?

Ben Kelway: No, it’s actually my nephew. I was going to use my son but he’s only two, so I think it would have been a nightmare. My nephew is six and he happens to be in isolation with us here in the country, so it worked out.

Thomas: Could you talk me through the portfolio and how it started?

Ben: When I got your email, I started to think about what a fashion portfolio meant or could mean. We’re in the countryside here in Wales, not in London, so we were faced with fairly limited means; I wasn’t sure if I could do anything. I called Tom Guinness, who I work with, and he thought it wouldn’t be possible to get any clothes. He said probably not, so I thought about the designers I collaborate with, Grace Wales Bonner and Craig Green, but then I remembered that you’d done fairly comprehensive stories with them, so I ruled them out. I also thought about approaching a photographer and doing something with a photographer remotely, but then, given the limited means, it seemed to make more sense to take the photos myself. I do bits of photography for magazines and I’ve done some things for Grace. I put my photos on Instagram, too, but they always bomb; they never get any further, which I actually take secret pleasure in. Then Tom suggested getting someone who makes clothes locally to run up some pieces; I liked that idea. We had talked about the clothes that are the cornerstones of a man’s wardrobe, and I like this idea of them being basic cartoonish shapes in primary colours. It’s basically what I wear: a denim jacket, a bomber jacket, an overcoat, a suit. Those are the basics of my wardrobe. I don’t know where the idea of making them all in the same fabric came from, but I like this kind of felt fabric, because it feels quite cartoony, a bit *Sesame Street* meets Joseph Beuys. We couldn’t find a local seamstress, so I ended up getting Ben, photographer Johnny Dufort’s brother, to do it. And that was that. For the images, we are in beautiful countryside here so I was a bit worried about making it too pastoral, especially with my nephew who is quite cute. I didn’t want it to look like a kids’ catalogue. So we set up a studio in one of the sheds and we shot a bit outside, too, as you can see. I liked the idea of shooting it in this black void, with this reduced idea of fashion. It felt like doing a fashion reset, with the idea of this kid looking to the future who is going to grow into the clothes. Something like that! I’m not sure how much I thought about the meaning in advance.

Thomas: The story looks excellent; it’s rich. In general, do you think that restriction itself is a useful or even necessary thing when it comes to creative work?

Ben: I think it is actually; I find it very helpful. The pictures I’ve usually done for magazines are the collections stories. Most people don’t want to do them, but I quite like the framework. You know, you’ve got to do something with that naff tracksuit and come up with a way of making it look good – I like that. And that’s what you have to do as an art director – you’re problem solving. I’m sure you’d agree. If you weren’t into doing that then I guess you would be an artist rather than an art director. I take as much pride in doing a really commercial job as something supposedly more creative. I’m not sure which one I enjoy more.

> **‘I like the problem solving that comes with being an art director; like, coming up with a way of making that naff tracksuit look good.’**

Thomas: Tell me, what constitutes a good image in your eyes and has that stayed the same throughout your career?

Ben: I always think that an image is good if someone has achieved what they set out to do and they are technically skilled enough in the studio to execute it correctly. Or it can be by someone whose style is much looser and whose intention is more about an edit. As anyone who knows me will tell you, I do have a bit of a problem with this younger generation of photographers who think it’s good use to film, but who don’t really know how to execute it. You can tell when it gets handed into the magazine – it’s milky thin, badly exposed. Jamie Hawkesworth knows how to do it, but there is a generation who don’t yet have the control to get what they set out to do. I don’t know, they like the element of chance in it.

Thomas: I think they find it more soulful, but you can do that with a digital camera.

Ben: You know, if someone has the technical control to actually get the image, then even if I don’t like the style of the picture, I can admire it.

Thomas: Have you always reacted like that?

Ben: I’ve always been a fairly harsh critic. I suppose there’s an element of control – which is why I ended up doing this! Controlling a process and how an image or a project turns out.

Thomas: There’s a craft element to it.

Ben: I don’t know about other art directors’ processes, but I often feel responsible for a client. Like, here are your references, here is what it’s going to look like, here is what a realistic person could pull off within the budget. I sometimes feel some other art directors might say, ‘Let’s see what happens on the day. This kid seems cool, here you go, no problem.’

Thomas: Unfortunately, it’s no longer like that. It used to be. Those were our dancing days.

Ben: Maybe it’s just the time I’ve come up in, but I have always gone with these really rigid proposals: here are the references; here’s the mock-up; here it is on a phone and on video. Maybe I’ve made a cage for myself by presenting in that way.

> **‘A lot of my decisions are quite intuitive; the designers will quite often say, ‘Oh you can’t do that, it’s not the Swiss school of whatever.’’**

Thomas: Was there a defining image, reference, moment or person from your teenage years that you now realize was instrumental in pushing you into fashion and more specifically, art direction?

Ben: It was definitely *The Face*; that was a turning point. I grew up in the north of England, so I wasn’t in London; I wasn’t in a big city.

Thomas: How old were you?

Ben: I’d say, 13; this was around 1990. There was *The Face* and *i-D*, but *i-D* was really London-centric, and as a 13-year-old up north *The Face* had a bit more of a global feel and was always very image led. I don’t know if there was one thing in particular. I remember seeing what David Sims was doing and thinking, ‘Ah, there’s a kid in that picture who looks like the kind of boy I might admire on the bus or school.’ Not in a sexy way. It was new to see that represented on a page in this revered location. I can’t forget that early Inez and Vinoodh work where they used Paintbox. I remember being quite blown away by it; it was so sick to see that in a magazine. There was that famous story where the model is kind of touching a kid; it’s so fucking weird.[1] It was really subversive and there was power in how *The Face* mixed those signals on a page, the mix of the rougher stuff with the polished stuff.

Thomas: What do you find most intuitive in your work and what do you overthink?

Ben: That’s a good question. My judgement of my work is usually pretty intuitive. I look at it and ask if it feels exciting or progressive to me, or if I saw that someone else had done it, would I would be jealous? It’s that sort of gut feeling. I am not a trained graphic designer – my background is more in pictures – so I have to work with a designer or technician. I don’t know the rules of graphic design, so a lot of my decisions are quite intuitive; the designers will quite often say, ‘Oh you can’t do that, it’s not the Swiss school of whatever.’

Thomas: And what do you overthink?

Ben: Everything, I think! Because the gut instinct only lasts for a minute and then it gets overthought and diluted and drawn out. I think I’m probably quite hard to work for because I can go round-the-houses a bit, and tweak and change. I wish I could be a bit more, ‘Oh, that’ll do, that won’t make any difference.’

Thomas: Did you always try to be different, even as a child?

Ben: I did, if I’m honest. When I was very young, we moved around a lot and I changed schools quite a lot, and my parents divorced. There was a lot of change, so I suppose by the time I started school I felt I was quite different, partly because my dad wasn’t around for a while, and then I had a different dad and that was unusual. I remember a turning point when I realized that different was cool and decided to make it into a positive, a strength. It felt like there was a bonus to being different and to being an outsider.

Thomas: Which person in the fashion industry do you most admire?

Ben: Gosh, that’s a hard question! I don’t know. I worked for David Sims for about eight years, but I don’t want to say him because he gets enough praise and accolades! [Laughs] He had a big influence on me. I was kind of an assistant and then I oversaw all his post-production, retouching stuff. Then I started to do research and some layouts and stuff in-house. Then there were some stranger projects we used to do, like I sort of developed and styled some of that early weird *Homme+* stuff he was doing. I don't want to say him though! Who shall I say? Someone uncompromising who didn't worry about money too much. Wait! Can I say David Bowie? Bowie in the 1970s – that was pretty tight as a body of work. It goes off in the 1980s, but there was a whole gamut of stuff there; it existed way outside of music. That was good. David Bowie then – he's a kind of fashion icon, too.

Thomas: What does success look like to you?

Ben: Success constantly shifts. If when I was younger I had seen myself now, I would have thought that I was extremely successful. Certainly when I was a kid, I would never have dreamed of this level of success. Just having a job that I liked, never mind a career I liked. But as you get older, the goalposts keep shifting. Doing work that you mostly enjoy and then mostly enjoying the process, that feels like success. I'm fairly comfortable financially, everyone would always like a bit more financially, but this seems like a pretty good balance.

'Sometimes I have jobs with four teams working simultaneously – main shoot, still lifes, video, behind-the-scenes – and you're spinning all these plates.'

Thomas: What do you now know about the fashion industry that you didn't know when you first started?

Ben: It has changed so much since I entered the industry; it's a whole different thing. When I first entered the industry, I was very unsure about whether I would be accepted and if I could fit in. It all seemed quite elusive to me, but very quickly I was surrounded by relatively like-minded people. Despite how it might seem from the outside, it is actually very welcoming. It takes in a lot of different people with different outlooks and backgrounds, and that surprised me. It is not as elitist as it looks; instead, there's this work ethic that brings people together and I have constantly found that a positive. Friends or peers work in advertising or film, and those industries actually seem a lot less welcoming.

Thomas: Were you expecting fashion to be a lot haughtier than it is?

Ben: I'm not sure. I was just really interested in images and their power. I suppose that I thought that fashion would be a good vehicle for the kinds of communications that I found interesting. I wasn't really interested in couture or high-heeled shoes, that side of things, which made me slightly feel like I'd be found out and that would be the undoing of me. But then I realized that often the people who come into fashion almost by accident and have these other rich areas of interest kind of make the best fashion work, even maybe some designers. For photographers, if you've only studied fashion photography and that is your library, then it can perhaps become a bit of a stale pool…

Thomas: Apart from Meisel.

Ben: He almost has his own language.

Thomas: As things gradually return to some level of normality, will your impulse be to explore fantasy and escapism or to double down on realism and documenting the moment?

Ben: Escapism and fantasy! I just did this big presentation for a brand that is traditionally more in that world and we talked about this quite a lot. I was saying that I just think people are going to want to watch escapist things. There is only a certain amount of real documentary-worthy stuff. I spoke to the client on the phone and said that everyone stuck at home isn't just watching the news the whole time; they're also watching *RuPaul's Drag Race* – and I think there'll be an appetite for more of that. You know what it's like, it's a swinging pendulum between the fantasy and the reality. The celebrity thing might take a bit of a hit, though. That might be less relevant. Maybe we'll get celebrity realism – now that would be a really horrible combination of things!

Thomas: Are there any of the lockdown changes that you still might appreciate when things start to subside or are you itching to get straight back to pre-Covid-19 processes? Do you miss the notion of 'Let's go to New York to shoot this, and we'll be a crowd of 50 people on the set!' That has become normal over the past 20 years. Do you want to go back to that?

Ben: I think it would be a shame to be really limited all of a sudden, because I doubt anyone's going to look at the final product and think, 'Oh, that's a bit crap, but I guess they only had a couple of people on set, so that's the best they could do!' People are still going to judge the work in the same way.

Thomas: In the 1950s and 1960s the models would do their own make-up on those Avedon photos, and those images are still incredible.

Ben: Funnily enough, I recently did a job that was on a scale I hadn't experienced for a while. We had two huge film studios, one for the video and one for stills, and it was just bonkers. It was like an entire village. I had my own area and it was bigger than my apartment; it had its own sofa and Diptych candle. I'm not even sure it made for good work. I won't miss that. I'm actually more interested to know how it will affect deliverables. Projects, certainly from my point of view, had really become stretched. Sometimes I have these jobs going where there are four teams working at the same time – a main shoot, still lifes, video, a behind-the-scenes – and you're spinning all these plates. I don't know why that level of deliverables would change, but people are talking as if it will, as if people's appetites will undergo a reset. I don't know if they will, though. Clients aren't going to stump up more money to have more days to shoot. Some brands might wish to appear more refined and less attainable and so might delve into other ways of doing things. I believe very much in the return of paper: a catalogue is more considered, precious and luxurious than any Instagram post. Even a digital version of a catalogue is better than an Instagram swipe. But then I still struggle not to think of pictures as two pages – what happens if you put this next to this – which is probably why I like doing magazines. A lot of my work is often about some sort of clash, with one thing only good because it is next to this one. I often solve a problem by taking one boring thing and putting it next to something else – and the whole thing immediately becomes interesting. In the portfolio, there are still lifes of junk and bits of tools and horrible, rusty things we found in the barn…

'I believe very much in the return of paper: a catalogue is more considered, precious and luxurious than any Instagram post will ever be.'

Thomas: There's a cabbage.

Ben: It's actually a wasp nest.

Thomas: A wasp nest? It's beautiful.

Ben: It is, isn't it? That was in the little barn where we set up the studio. There is also some lead. Again this is that exaggerated version of masculinity that I sat next to these brightly coloured clothes. I did the still lifes because I was worried about the kid's pictures being too cute, so I like the idea of them sitting next to these brutal bits. It's quite Joseph Beuys; sinister and dark. Scary, adult, dangerous and dirty against the kid's clothes.

Thomas: It's really arresting, and a great fashion portfolio. With or without the context, it's a brilliant story in any magazine.

Ben: Oh good, I'm glad you like it!

Thomas: As you said, it's not always easy to understand where creative directors are coming from and why they do what they do and how, so these kinds of conversations are always really interesting.

Ben: I often think that an art director is like a music producer and the photographer is like the musician, you know what I mean? The producer can work with all these different musicians and create all these different ways of working, while the photographer often just does their thing.

Thomas: That's an interesting analogy.

Ben: You can use it!

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1. Originally part of a story entitled 'For Your Pleasure', published in *The Face* in April 1994, the photograph features a highly retouched image of a woman, which has been inserted into a stock image of a doctor's surgery. Dressed in a 'two-tone stretch satin and lace pantsuit by Bertrand Marechel', she has her hands positioned on a laughing child's bare stomach and her head thrown back.

PATRICK LI / LI, INC.

PHOTOGRAPHED BY RICHARD BURBRIDGE

TIME WELL SPENT

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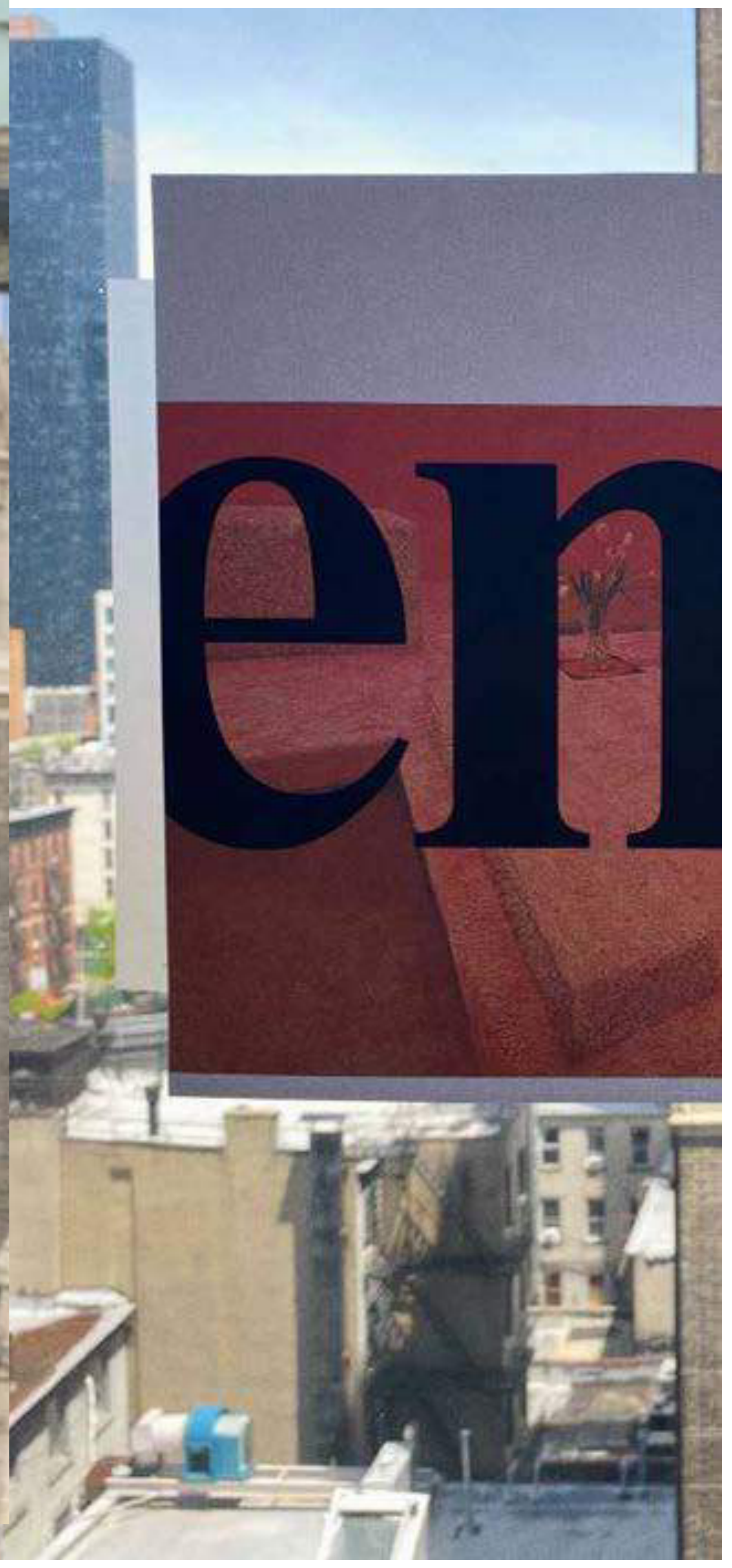

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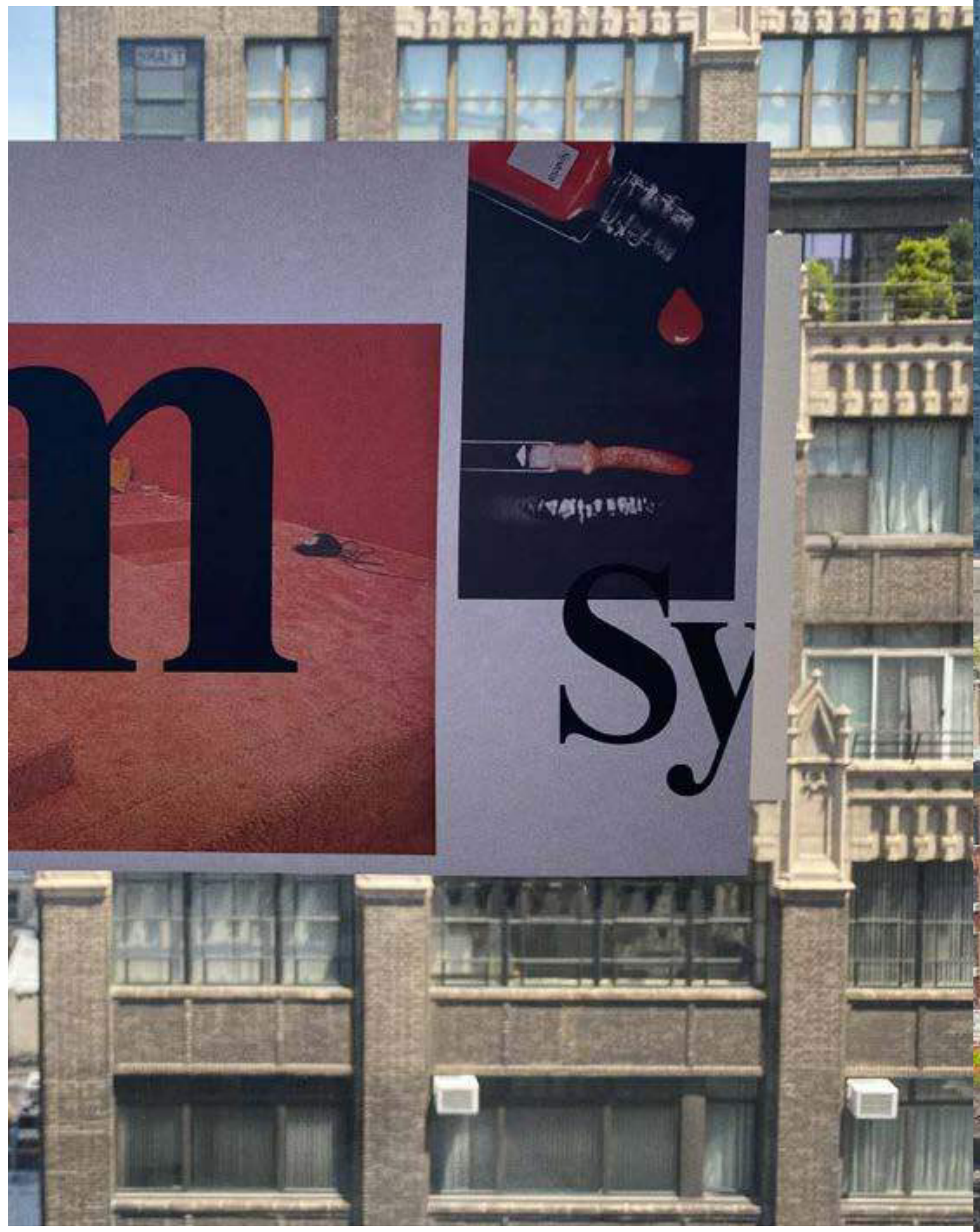

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SPECIAL THANKS TO SETH ZUCKER, CAROL COHEN, TOMAS DECARCER, HANNAH YASSKY AND ALL AT LI, INC. PAST AND PRESENT

‘It’s not super hard to make “pretty”, it’s super hard to subvert and transport it to a different kind of place.’

A conversation with Patrick Li, 21 May 2020.

Thomas Lenthal: Could you talk me through the portfolio?

Patrick Li: I took a step back and thought about what it means to work during this time, and how lucky we are that we can do this despite the chaos. I thought maybe it was a good time to be more revelatory or transparent with the process. We spend so much time making things that never see the light of day, so one idea was to reuse these layouts that we had made over the past 15 to 20 years. They support projects that never really surfaced, so I wanted to bring those to the forefront.

‘Many fashion images are too ahead of their time and have too much going on in them. But some mediate that balance perfectly and become forever images.’

Thomas: What are they exactly, like presentation material?

Patrick: I was thinking about images that I could work with. Instead of having a photographer supply images, I wanted to turn the tables and have a photographer rework material that originated elsewhere. The references in what I submitted are very common, but they are chopped up and reassembled, and that in itself was kind of fun. The twist here was to have a photographer re-photograph them. This era of working with reference visuals is simultaneously constrictive and liberating. It’s absurd how specific a lot of them have to be now; you have to show the client *exactly* what you are going to do. There’s no more creating on set. I find that a little disturbing, but it is also part of the reality, so in the studio we make a point of exploration and fun.

Thomas: On certain accounts, do you tend to deal almost exclusively with middle management?

Patrick: It’s the chain of command, totally. There is a culture of fear. With more and more corporate clients it is definitely like that: the marketing person does not want to get in trouble. That is the reality of the structure today. It doesn’t allow for pure expression unless you have a direct link to a designer, and that is rarer today. You no longer really work for *someone*. I think that this limitation has deterred a lot of possibilities. And it’s not about the size of the business, it’s really about the layers of supposed decision-makers. When you were talking about the middle men, it’s those different layers that can be the block.

Thomas: It has made the playground smaller and smaller.

Patrick: Not just the playground, but the structures: this is all you have, you have to work with this. A lot of it is second guessing, too, like, ‘Oh I think this will work.’ That may be a natural part of a creative process, it should be done more instinctively, and sadly, it’s not. But I do feel there is a possibility to be more genuine or more real now. This era expects that.

Thomas: What do you find intuitive and what do you overthink in your work?

Patrick: There are different approaches to that. Either I consider myself as a service provider – which I think is a different approach to many colleagues or other people who I respect – and you want to help direct the conversation. That is my intuitive approach to solving a problem. There is always an issue that needs to be resolved and in that case I really like working on strategy rather than pure artistic expression. Instinct is my normal go-to. That means considering what the task at hand is, and how best respond to it, or how I can express myself totally. I’m not going to send a sketch and say this is the answer. I know that many people do, and they are solutions, just not the ones that come to me.

Thomas: To find relevant solutions, you need to be able to have a conversation with whoever you’re working with?

Patrick: Yeah, I mean, you hope you can. It is so rare.

Thomas: Do you find restriction a useful or necessary thing when it comes to creative work?

Patrick: Boundaries help to define what the challenge is. I find reacting to boundaries one of the most enjoyable activities somehow, trying both to comply and to skirt around what the boundaries are and why they exist. Often they are completely arbitrary, and I enjoy getting into that moment of dialogue with whoever is doing the commission: why is that what you need? Obviously when it is for a fashion brand there are the image-building and pragmatic issues, like creating desire and sales. In general, boundaries for me are not really restrictive; they liberate me and they are an enjoyable part of the process.

Thomas: Since Covid-19, a couple of hundred thousand people in the industry are all experiencing a new reality. Do you think they’re enjoying this change of pace or are they traumatised?

Patrick: Obviously, context is so critical. You are used to one thing and then you are completely disarmed the next day. Isolation feels like a more emotional time than before. So I think New Yorkers must be reacting in a very specific way. In the city, you’re around millions of people all the time, but that in itself became such a huge liability. It’s been such a radical upheaval of our existence; things have completely changed now. Exchange is in the very nature of collaboration, but the foundation of that exchange is now completely different, having gone from in-person to digital exchanges. We are all talking through texts and FaceTime and Zoom and while you are obviously missing the humanity, the exchange is still there.

‘You want to seduce but also create a repulse-and-attract dynamic. I always talk about things having a sort of vibration between good and bad taste.’

Thomas: I imagine the differences must be even more striking in New York.

Patrick: I am on the tip of Long Island and there is nobody. I have friends still in their apartment in the city and they still need to go to Whole Foods and wait in line, six feet away from someone else. It’s not really like that where I am. This experience is so personal and about where you find yourself. When it comes to work, it was fascinating to see how we found resolve in how we approach it. At the magazine at the *New York Times*, we are still having regular meetings, and we have the support of a very smart, large organization with the structure to send you a computer if you need it. It’s remarkable.

Thomas: I was speaking to other American art directors and they were saying they were just getting used to the basic and essential stuff. Also after two months, you really get into that completely different zone and for some people it is highly enjoyable. Do you miss the before?

Patrick: There are certainly aspects I miss, but it depends on what you find meaningful personally. Part of the reward of work for me has always been to be with a bunch of people and create, but since lockdown, I’ve been finding it really, really gratifying to have a work meeting and then go outside and plant some plants. I have never done that before and it’s awesome. I’m really surprised. I’m like, ‘OK, I’m going to go outside and pull weeds for half an hour before my next meeting.’ It’s a weird reset like nothing I’ve ever experienced before. It doesn’t seem real, yet I know it is, and I am having a hard time resolving that because who knows how long this will be? It’s pretty enjoyable right now though.

Thomas: What constitutes a good image in your eyes?

Patrick: I think the enduring image for me is the most successful: one that triggers a reaction that goes beyond the standard emotional response. It is an image that respects a certain moment of creation somehow, but also propels things forward. There are a lot of images, in fashion specifically, that are too ahead of their time and have too much going on in them. But there are some that just mediate that balance perfectly and become forever images.

Thomas: What you’re looking for is timelessness?

Patrick: It’s not necessarily timeless in that sense, but it is enduring. There is a difference in the lifespan of an image. Some are more immediate, but that is not to say that they are less important than an image that has a longer life span. How you define a lasting image, and how you make one, are two different things. The frequency of how often you see a certain image is one of the key factors. I’m talking about the duration of how long it is allowed to exist or be at the forefront. The time to make an image is of course completely different now. We don’t have time to craft. While it’s hard to know if an image will become enduring, you can see a magic through the lens of the photographers you work with. There will often be a ‘this is it’ moment, a spark that can help create a more enduring image, separate from the marketing brief. Often, though, things are just not given the chance to survive out there in the world, but that’s a whole other question!

Thomas: It’s interesting because we work in an industry where seduction is everything. Fashion photography has to be immediately attractive, but then also endure?

Patrick: Yes, but I don’t know if it isn’t more attractive or provocative, like you want to seduce but also create a repulse-and-attract dynamic. I always talk about things having a sort of vibration between good and bad taste. There are moments when we’ll work on something and be like, ‘That is too pretty.’ That is what I call the tyranny of good taste. Once it happens, it’s like the end of the game. You’ve got to subvert it somehow, that’s the exciting moment for me. It’s not super hard to make “pretty”, it’s super hard to subvert and transport it to a different kind of place. There are different factors that can provide that subversion. There are a lot of different ways of arriving at that place. Sometimes it’s staying up all night, like, the deadline is tomorrow and now I have to finish this. That happens to me a lot. Like, I’m so tired, just do it! That obviously changes as one gets older, but I have always worked that way.

> **‘How long have we known each other and never really had a chance to talk like this before? This Covid situation has enabled some rewarding things.’**

Thomas: With hindsight, was there ever an image, reference, person or moment from your teenage years that was key to you having a career in fashion art direction?

Patrick: It was really through music, where you would get these moments when design, photography, language, word choice, all united perfectly. I didn’t really know whose role it was to help those things come together. Because it’s not just solely a graphic-design challenge. It is about aligning all these different energies that could be at odds with each other but somehow come together in that moment; and that’s just really cool. For me, that was [record label] 4AD, where it was like, ‘This music is so insane, and this album packaging and the titles and the meaning is mind-blowing.’ It was just a very specific aesthetic position that felt passionate; someone had a point of view and really went for it. I would say the same thing about other kinds of aesthetic positions that were at odds with what I felt my values or identities were. Like Led Zeppelin, for example, I love some of those album covers. There were also punk or protest graphics, which were so unapologetic about all those positions and which I really admired. After a while things can sort of bleed together and lose their potency, but I really love those genesis moments, when things really came together. They provided some structure for me to aspire to.

Thomas: How old were you when you were enthralled by those Led Zeppelin covers?

Patrick: I was maybe late to the game, but at the end of high school, early college. I’ve told this story before, but when I was in college working at this magazine store, I realized that, ‘Oh my gosh, there’s a *Vogue* in Italy, did you know that? How cool is that!’ Maybe Fabien [Baron] was there at that point. I also discovered this magazine called *Emigre*, which is a graphic-design magazine; it was so amazing. They said their next issue was going to be a special 4AD issue, and I was like, ‘What? How is that possible?’[1] I wrote them a letter on a photocopied Comme des Garçons postcard saying, ‘I love your magazine, can I come work for you? Do you need anything? You know, I am a big 4AD fan.’ Nothing, no response and the magazine came out and I was like: fuckers. But then I got a call the next day and they said, ‘We were busy with this issue, but now we do actually need some help. Can you come and help us shift these magazines?’ So that was my first real job where I was exposed to a world of graphic design I had no idea existed. I got to New York after that, and there was a 4AD *Emigre* poster up at the *Interview* art department when I started working there, which was really weird. So it’s a very linear path.

Thomas: Do you prefer working for a niche demographic or a larger audience?

Patrick: There are always discussions about whether you should reflect an audience or do you lead an audience. Other magazines out there reflect, but that is not what Hanya [Yanagihara, editor in chief of *T*] wants to do with *T*. She really wants to provoke and lead, and is leading through diversity and a lot of gender fluidity. That is really a large part of what the magazine aims to do.

Thomas: Which person working in the fashion industry do you most admire, and why?

Patrick: It would be a cross between Margiela and Rei Kawakubo, for being able to do what they do and making it successful.

Thomas: And being so elusive.

Patrick: And being elusive. That adds to a certain kind of mythology, but it is more that you judge the person by their work, and you can always tell who created it and what it is. You might not understand it, but I think that can be even better somehow. They have made huge businesses out of these things that are so specific. That is remarkable.

Thomas: Can you describe a professional disappointment?

Patrick: It would start with a lack of humanity in the fashion world. We all know it’s a competitive industry for brands and for everybody, and I’m sure that even at a dentists’ convention there’s a lot of competitiveness, but sometimes it can feel like there are a lot of crazy people who do things in fashion that they wouldn’t be allowed to do anywhere else. It is an industry that really celebrates and even mythologizes bad behaviour and cruelty.

Thomas: It feels to me like this whole ethos of cruelty is slowly dissipating.

Patrick: For sure. Fashion at its highest level takes its cues from contemporary art, for example. Most of the contemporary artists who are relevant and the most meaningful today work their asses off. They have an instinct to create, but the way they make their business or practice, they’re not like: ‘Look how easy this is.’ The most successful designers today are the ones who work incredibly hard.

Thomas: To finish our conversation, what will you take away from this moment and is there something that will continue to resonate when things start to subside? Are you itching to get back to the pre-Covid system?

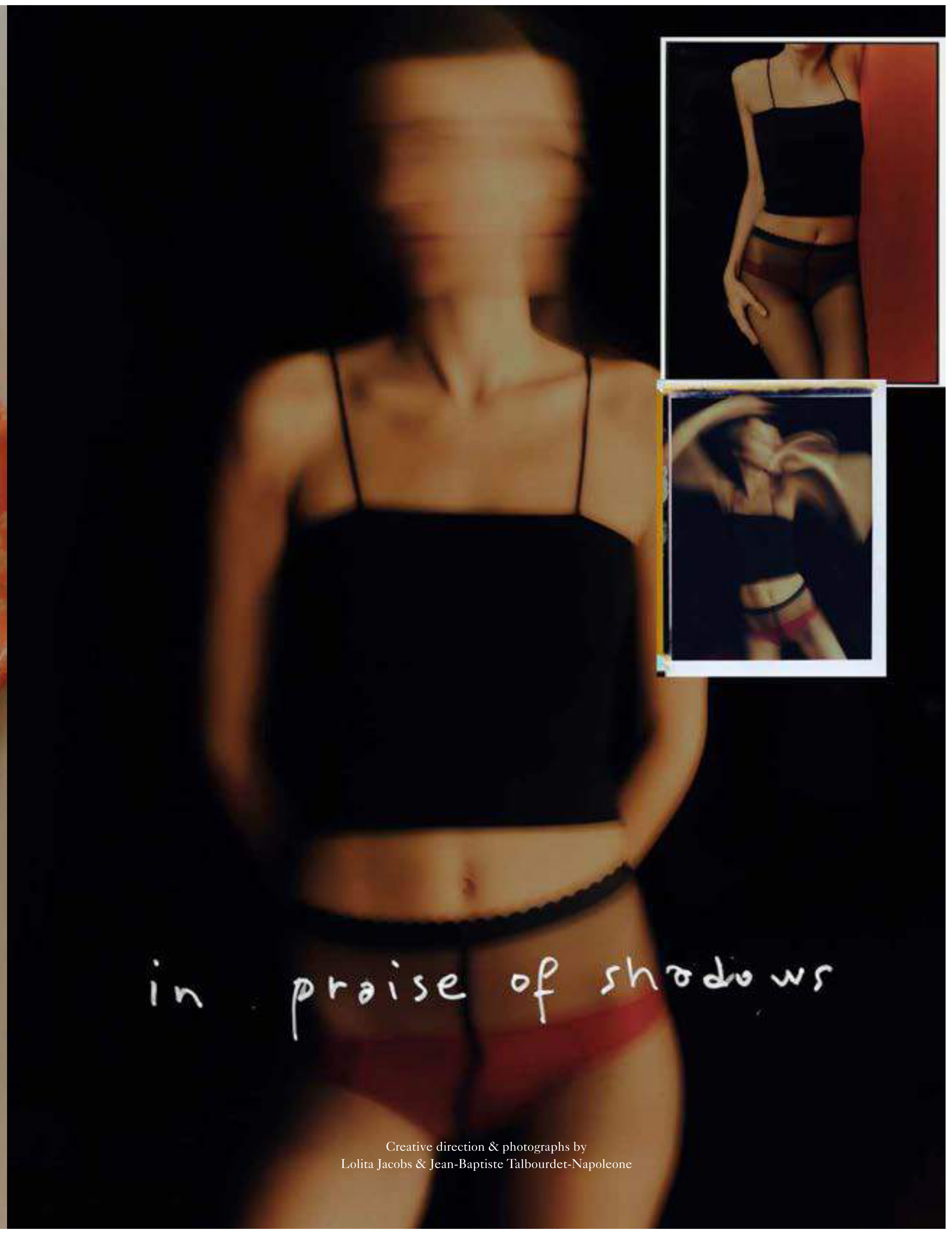
Patrick: I can’t imagine going back to pre-Covid. I think this is a radical shift in what’s happening with our culture right now; it’s not like an isolated thing. I mean 9/11 was huge for us and did impact the rest of the world, but what is happening now with the pandemic is truly a global incident, which feels really transformative. It would be naive to think we can just go back to a time before this happened. I do feel like there has been a greater awareness of, I don’t know, the human connection. It’s weird because with all the digital stuff that was happening pre-pandemic, everyone wanted to be engaged experientially, but that is obviously a very different conversation today. Suddenly the digital can spark a very emotional response, much more so than normal. There are things you see where you are like, ‘Wow, that is really beautiful and touching or really fucked up and very disturbing.’ But it has been so much more emotional than before. I think that that awareness is going to endure.

Thomas: This change of pace feels a little more human somehow, so we might have trouble readapting to that culture of everything being hectic and hysterical somehow.

Patrick: The circular repetitive act of working pre-Covid – getting to work every morning, having lunch, going home – I think is gone. It’s a different kind of pattern now and we need to adjust to it. Now I can take a break and go pull weeds, which I really enjoy! I find myself being more productive in a certain way, but other people are more frantic. Did I e-mail in time? Like, you’re at home, you should be working, what else are you supposed to be doing anyway? We are all trying to establish what our routines are, which is a very human response. You need that structure or you don’t – it depends on your personality or psyche – but I do think the process has completely changed. You can take more time to have more meaningful conversations. Now there is actually time, you’re not snatching a few minutes between meetings. Like this – this is so rewarding, how long have we known each other and never talked like this before? This situation has enabled your issue to happen and that’s a whole thing. Actually, that is why I have been working with Richard Burbridge to do this portfolio. I had always been a fan of his work even before he moved to New York. I remember at *Self Service*, I wanted him to do a still life and he said, ‘This is the lighting and the retouching’, and I was like, ‘Dude, we can’t afford any of that, so let’s just try with the flashlight and see what happens.’ And it was such a great story; it is still a nice reference.[2] It really did become a part of his language, and it came out of a spontaneous discussion. He didn’t know I was doing this project with you, but I said it would be a nice way to complete the circle, to come back to this idea of what a fluid collaboration can be. He didn’t use a fancy camera; he wasn’t in his studio; he didn’t have a team of assistants – it was just him taping stuff to the window. It was so cool for that to come around, and it’s all thanks to you.

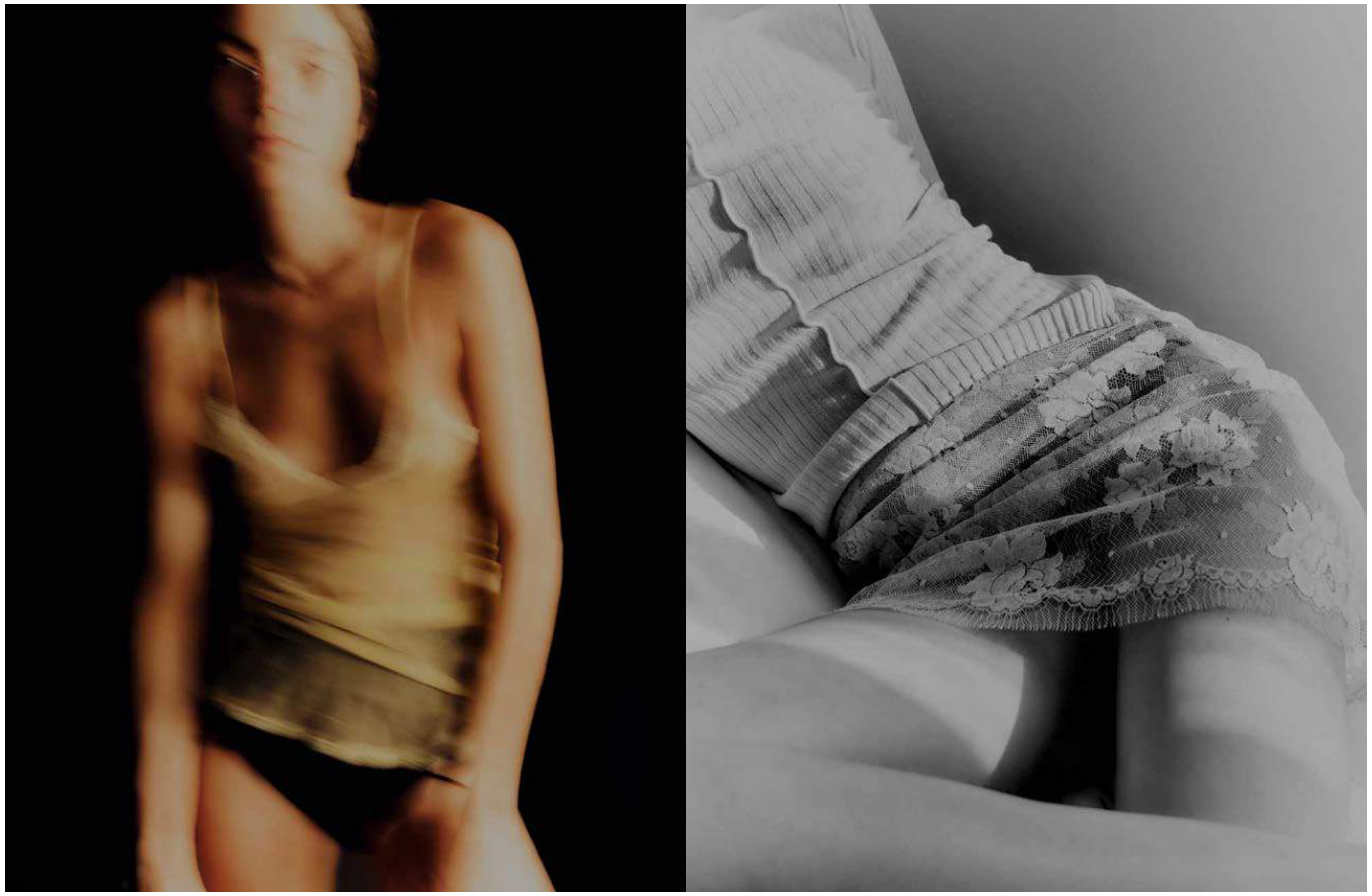
[1] Sixty-nine issues of the niche, but highly influential *Emigre* (‘The magazine that ignores boundaries’) were published between 1984 and 2005. Designed by Rudy VanderLans and featuring pioneering digital typography created by his wife Zuzana Licko, it was one of the first magazines to use computers and desktop-publishing software. *Emigre* ‘4AD’, which featured interviews with designer Vaughn Oliver, the Cocteau Twins and the Throwing Muses, was issue nine and published in 1988.

[2] The chiaroscuro still-life images of make-up were published in issue 17 of *Self Service* in 2002.



in praise of shadows

Creative direction & photographs by
Lolita Jacobs & Jean-Baptiste Talbourdet-Napoleone



‘We can hardly criticize image over-consumption when we work for a weekly magazine that produces 50 times the content of a biannual.’

**A conversation with Lolita Jacobs and Jean-Baptiste Talbourdet-Napoleone (LJBTN),
13 May 2020.**

Thomas Lenthal: Let’s start by discussing your portfolio. You’re among the rare contributors to have exploited the notion of intimacy in the simplest and most direct sense of the word. If I understand correctly, these are your own clothes, and you’ve concentrated on exploring what can be intimate, familiar, and even domestic. It’s very nice work: simple and direct.

Lolita Jacobs: We tried to do what we could with what we had!

Jean-Baptiste Talbourdet-Napoleone: We asked ourselves a series of questions. Were we working just as ‘artistic directors’? Because if so, should we commission a photographer, and so on? Was it in the end completely our project or were we just graphic designers? Should we do it ourselves, as we like doing, using several of the strings to our design bow, from photography to fashion design, and even take it further, with Lolita as the model? Could we develop an ecosystem that could produce the whole series? The brief was ‘fashion portfolio’, so we wondered whether we wanted to do one in a ‘pure fashion’ version, without being too literal. We like fashion, but we also like to step away from it. We were trying to do something more artistic, with a focus on clothes. But which clothes? That’s when we embarked on the idea of intimacy, which includes us, too, as we’re intimately together, as well as being confined together; we quickly realized we had to do it ourselves, play the game. All this questioning was pretty interesting.

Thomas: I’ve asked everyone this question, and everyone has answered yes, while understanding the question differently: do you think restriction is a useful or even necessary thing when it comes to creative work?

Jean-Baptiste: If we had no restrictions, we’d be artists, not artistic directors, and I mean artists in the noblest sense of the term. Restriction is necessary, sometimes, because you need a framework and a brief. But it can be complicated to negotiate, too, because sometimes you just want to blow up the framework.

Lolita: Restriction is interesting, because if we didn’t have parameters, we wouldn’t have a space in which to play, test, push, have fun. At the same time, it’s exciting to be able to escape those parameters a little.

Thomas: I’d like to come back to this notion of the artist. Over the past century, artists have been people who impose their own restrictions. Even if that is just the medium that they choose to work in. I’m interested in the notion of external restriction. I don’t know about you, but I’ve never received a brief that holds water in my life.

Jean-Baptiste: In that situation, the restriction is the client. But ‘restriction’ doesn’t necessarily mean something pejorative. With every client, the first thing we do is try to ask them the right question. Clients will tell us lots of stuff, and it’s important to absorb all that and then to go back and ask the question: ‘I think this is what you want, is this right?’ That’s the first thing. In reality, the restriction is going to come from the client’s understanding, from whether they are open enough to go where we would like to take them, from whether they trust us or limit us. Perhaps they want something and it’s clear that there is no chance of taking them in another direction. In general, I’d say that the restriction is usually the client.

Thomas: Which brings us to the subject of how you talk to clients. Some interviewees have said that if they can’t communicate clearly with the client, they can’t do the work.

Lolita: That’s also something that comes with experience and depends on how much stature you have.

Jean-Baptiste: Some younger people work like that, too. There are people who work in absolutes and ideals – and I really admire that. That’s not how we do things; we’re more inclined to keep trying to work it out to the very end.

Lolita: Sometimes, we have to force ourselves a little! But it’s cushioned as we’re two: If one of us feels less comfortable than the other, then we can have a back-and-forth that can be useful.

Jean-Baptiste: Sometimes we can start with a really ambitious concept and the work is about peeling back the layers, even if you almost never get to the essence of the idea.

Lolita: You’re exaggerating! It does happen sometimes.

‘It’s cushioned as we’re two: if one of us feels less comfortable than the other, then we can have a back-and-forth that can be useful.’

Jean-Baptiste: Rarely! These days it’s only magazines that offer that kind of total creative freedom.

Thomas: What, for you, is a good fashion image?

Jean-Baptiste: I often hear photographers describing themselves as fashion photographers. I really don’t like that, because to me you’re either a photographer or you’re not. If you’re a good photographer, you can shoot anything: food, landscape, reportage, fashion. A fashion image is interesting precisely because fashion has constraints. It is only good if the team and limitations work together: the model, the styling, the hair, the make-up, the ideas, the photographer, the lighting. It’s a group effort. Not that you necessarily need all those elements to produce a good image. On a shoot, the two crucial roles are model and photographer. In the 1990s, you had Kate Moss shot by Corinne Day on a white background, no lighting, no styling, just Kate Moss in her pants on a white backdrop – and it became an iconic fashion image. The necessary elements are the model and the magic of the photographer. It’s also about the fact that it takes place at a particular moment in time, because a fashion image is totally connected to its society or era. Whenever I think of a period in history, I think of its clothes and cars. When I think of the 1960s, I picture the clothes people were wearing and the cars they were driving. A fashion image is of its time and its social context.

Thomas: The notion of a document of a specific moment is a funny one because it sets aside ideas of nostalgia. There’s a whole part of Meisel’s work, for example, that is about a moment, but is also about escapism and dreams. It seems to me that this escapism is one of the schools of fashion photography, but it’s condemned by serious people who can’t stand frivolity.

Jean-Baptiste: I know this is very reductive, but I’ve always thought that there are two categories of photographer: the Steven Meisels and the Juergen Tellers. The Meisels are going to be sublime; they have a particular magnifying touch and they know how to do everything: black-and-white, colour, daylight, flash, studio. Then there are the Tellers who are not at all about magnifying reality, but who rather shoot, like Andreas Gursky, almost brutally, to produce a raw reality. I always wonder which way to go with a project: should we magnify or portray reality?

Thomas: As a result of what we’re living through, which side are you going to want to explore afterwards?

Lolita: If you look at the work we did for the portfolio, we’re not at all about reflecting reality, we are focused on something much more aesthetic. We’re not always like that, but I do think that the aesthetic aspect drives our work more than straight-up reality.

Jean-Baptiste: I’d like to see our work in the studio and for the magazine in the Steven Meisel category in terms of artistic direction. I oscillate between styles and I like to mix things up; I don’t want to always do the same thing. This was an aesthetically driven project, and as soon as we’d sent it, I thought we should have done something rawer, trashier, in the kitchen with the baby, more reportage style. But if we’d done that, I’d have wanted to do something else.

Lolita: We just gravitated to what felt natural in the moment.

Jean-Baptiste: It’s true that we do definitely tend to gravitate towards the aesthetic impulse. I wonder, for an artistic director, if it’s legible to have several styles or if it’s more interesting to have a single style for 30 years, as some art directors do. It’s great to never tire of something like that, to bang your nails into the same hole with the same hammer, again and again. And there are others who are guided by the era. I like to live in my era, to talk to people of my era, to live in and deal with the present. That’s something that’s been rattling around in my brain. I’ve been trying to figure out whether it’s better to stay on one trajectory or whether you can afford to deviate, knowing that you’re still heading in the right direction.

Thomas: Was there a moment or image that inspired you to choose this particular line of work?

Lolita: Jean-Baptiste and I got here by different routes. I studied art in Britain and that education system is very different: it’s much freer and self-taught. You’re left the freedom to think and reveal your ideas. After I’d finished that, I really wanted to go into fashion, either design or styling, so I did as many internships as I could, working in magazines, with stylists. Because of that, and because of who I met, I developed an artistic trajectory. I met Franck Durand, who became my mentor. I started working in his atelier and

‘As soon as we’d sent you our portfolio, I felt we should have done something rawer, trashier, in the kitchen with our baby, more reportage style.’

discovered this career that I had been working towards for years without having a name for it.

Jean-Baptiste: It was a bit like that for me, but very different from the point of view of education. Even if Lolita says she had a free learning experience at Saint Martins, it was still academic, in the sense that it was four years of study and Saint Martins is considered the best school for fashion and design. So, even if you are free, there are professors to push you.

Lolita: But it was really an art-school education; you were supposed to become an artist at the end; you had to figure it out yourself. The name Saint Martins is impressive, but the reality is that we were left to our own devices.

Jean-Baptiste: Yes, but you had teachers, you had the time to explore, to experiment, you had materials at your disposal. I did a year at Ateliers de Sèvres, then a year of graphic-design school, but I left at 19 because the school wasn't for me. I had to learn on the job, and I didn't really discover graphic design until I ended up in an advertising agency doing layouts. What I really wanted to do, though, was animation at Pixar or Disney, when I discovered while working that drawing was my absolute passion. Then I met Antoine Jean and Éric Pillault of Éditions Jalou and *Jalouse*, and that's how I became familiar with the idea of the magazine as an object and with typography, which I'd found totally tedious at school. I discovered fashion much later, when I was 19 or 20; it hit me, and I was hooked. I discovered a world I knew nothing about. I had to learn everything myself; I bought magazines. I had no teachers to guide me, no peers to discuss things with. Antoine pushed me to buy magazines and to pay attention to who the photographers were, who the stylists were. He pushed me to buy photography books, to drown myself in imagery. So Lolita and I had different trajectories, but for both of us, the self-taught aspect was important and still is. The portfolio reflects that, too. My father, who was in the military, always told me that you have to set an example. I apply that to my work; if I want to talk to a photographer or stylist or illustrator, I have to understand what they do so I can talk to them properly. As artistic directors, having that kind of knowledge helps us communicate better with the people we work with. If you ask a photographer to do something and he or she says, 'that's nonsense', then you have to know what you're talking about or you'll get nowhere. If I can tell the photographer to stand in a certain place, to use a particular lighting, to use one aperture rather than another, or a particular lens, the photo will be closer to what I had in mind. Of course, there are ways of asking, but being able to do that diplomatically means I can get the result I want, at least on commercial jobs. With magazines, it's much freer and more about curation than artistic direction. It's about selecting the right team, putting people together, letting them get on with it, and not intervening. I can always readjust if what is emerging isn't in the creative spirit of the magazine, but the principal idea is not to be too present.

> **'People think artistic directors direct teams, which means being strong, and they don't think women can do that type of role – which is completely wrong.'**

Thomas: Ideally, do you prefer to work for a niche audience who you respect or for the general public?

Jean-Baptiste: These days, the spectrum is so wide, we couldn't say that we're working for a niche audience.

Lolita: I prefer a wider audience, even if it's interesting to address our peers.

Jean-Baptiste: The idea of a wider audience is interesting. With *M le magazine*, we're talking to everyone from my grandmother in deepest Périgord to our peers in the sixth *arrondissement* of Paris. It's about being able to talk to the widest number of people, but educating them, too, in a sense, in what we love, our tastes, graphic design, and photography. When we do a photographic portrait of a politician, we're not going to do it how [weekly news magazine] *Le Point* or [daily newspaper] *Le Parisien* would do it, using a cheap digital news image and no retouching. We want to speak to the widest audience without compromising on quality. In our studio work, we don't tend to limit ourselves to a particular type of client. We prefer to be open-minded and to work with all sorts of brands, with their different goals. That way we can really have fun and not get stuck doing the same thing. It's interesting to have a wider perspective, even if there are niche jobs that interest us, too.

Lolita: I agree, but whether it's niche or a wider audience, you still have to deal with people who speak the same language. Even if the views are different, they should have the energy and the desire to create.

Thomas: It's stunning when commercial work also has complexity and poetry. I always think of Hollywood studio cinema from the 1930s to the 1950s. The restrictions were appalling, but it produced films for a huge audience *and* managed to create some of the greatest moments of poetry of the 20th century. There are artistic directors who manage to achieve that too, but it's rare.

Jean-Baptiste: It's rare to have those two things together and to make a success of both. Today, we have somewhat lost the concept of beauty, which is of course subjective. Standardization has taken over France, in street furniture, cars, clothes. You go outside into the street and everything is hideous. Really! I don't want to seem backwards-looking, because what we find beautiful today from 40 years ago may have seemed ugly at the time. And maybe in 40 years people will think cars and bus shelters from 2020 are fabulous.

Thomas: Who in this industry do you admire the most and why?

Lolita: We really respect Peter Saville. For his work, but also for his character; the way he talks about himself with such nonchalance.

Jean-Baptiste: In the fashion industry, I really rate Hedi Slimane. I think he is an artistic director in the full sense of the term. It's such a clichéd term these days – everyone's an artistic director – but he created his own world. That might seem like a totalitarian way of doing things, but I really respect him. To be a designer who changed the fashion codes of his time, which he did in the 2000s – that's huge. He marked his era. As for artistic directors, there are loads, from Alexey Brodovitch to George Lois at *Esquire*, who is a yardstick for me, Paul Strand…

Thomas: Have you had any professional disappointments and what did you learn from them?

Lolita: You can't always get it right. There are things we love and things we love less. We get over it; we don't have that type of ego. The disappointments are of the human kind, because we work in a milieu that can be quite hard, and you have to fight. Sometimes that fighting isn't pretty. It can make people bitter, even though, at the end of the day, we're not saving lives. We're so lucky to do this job; we have to keep our feet on the ground and remember that. It's quite dangerous to take things badly and too much to heart.

> **'Standardization has completely taken over France, in street furniture, cars, clothes. You go outside into the street and everything is hideous. Really!'**

Thomas: Lolita, why do you think there appear to be fewer women in this line of work?

Lolita: People think an artistic director has to direct a team, which means being strong and having a strong personality, and they don't think a woman can do that type of role – which is completely wrong.

Jean-Baptiste: I can't explain why there aren't more women, except that many artistic directors have been around a long time and when they started out women were less common in the industry. But that's changing and that's good, particularly in photography. For ages there were only men and now there are lots of female photographers.

Thomas: Do you want to go back to working in the way that we were before confinement?

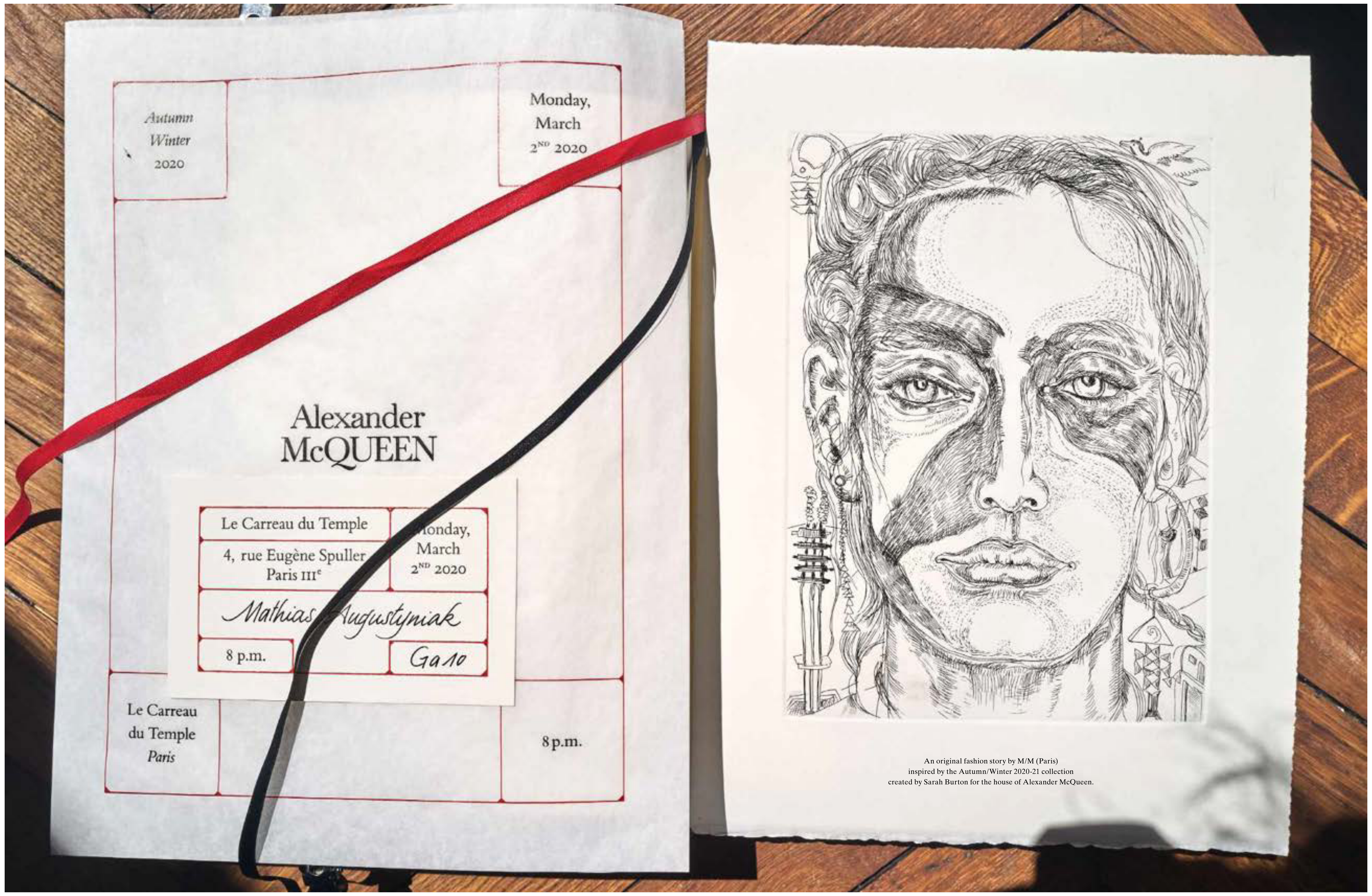
Jean-Baptiste: I have no particular desire to return to the frenzy when everything starts up again. Bad habits will get the upper hand again, and everyone will start racing towards who knows what.

Lolita: The general madness had been bothering us for a while.

Jean-Baptiste: We've chosen to be slaves to it and once things are back to normal, we'll fall back in like everyone else, knowing that we don't want it but unable to see another way to work.

Thomas: Lots of people are concerned about the density of production required now, and that there is hardly any time to create anything profound because the number of images required stifles real creation. It's all about producing, producing, producing.

Jean-Baptiste: Images are something we consume on our mobiles, now. One image crowds out another, and everyone just flips through them. I can hardly criticize that system when I work for a weekly and produce 50 times the content of a biannual magazine. I can't say that we should produce less, because then I'd have to close the magazine. But what are we creating? Why are we creating it? What are we trying to say? What do we want to show? Digital communication has brought an explosion of deliverables, when 20 years ago we'd produce five images and a film for a campaign. But we're dependent on brands, and we can't reverse that. We could be the Che Guevaras of artistic direction and insist that we're not going to do it, but then someone else would do it instead. That's a pessimistic vision, perhaps, but it's realistic: a pessimistic realism.



Autumn
Winter
2020

Monday,
March
2ND 2020

Alexander
McQUEEN

Le Carreau du Temple
4, rue Eugène Spuller
Paris IIIe

onday,
March
2ND 2020

Mathias Augustyniak

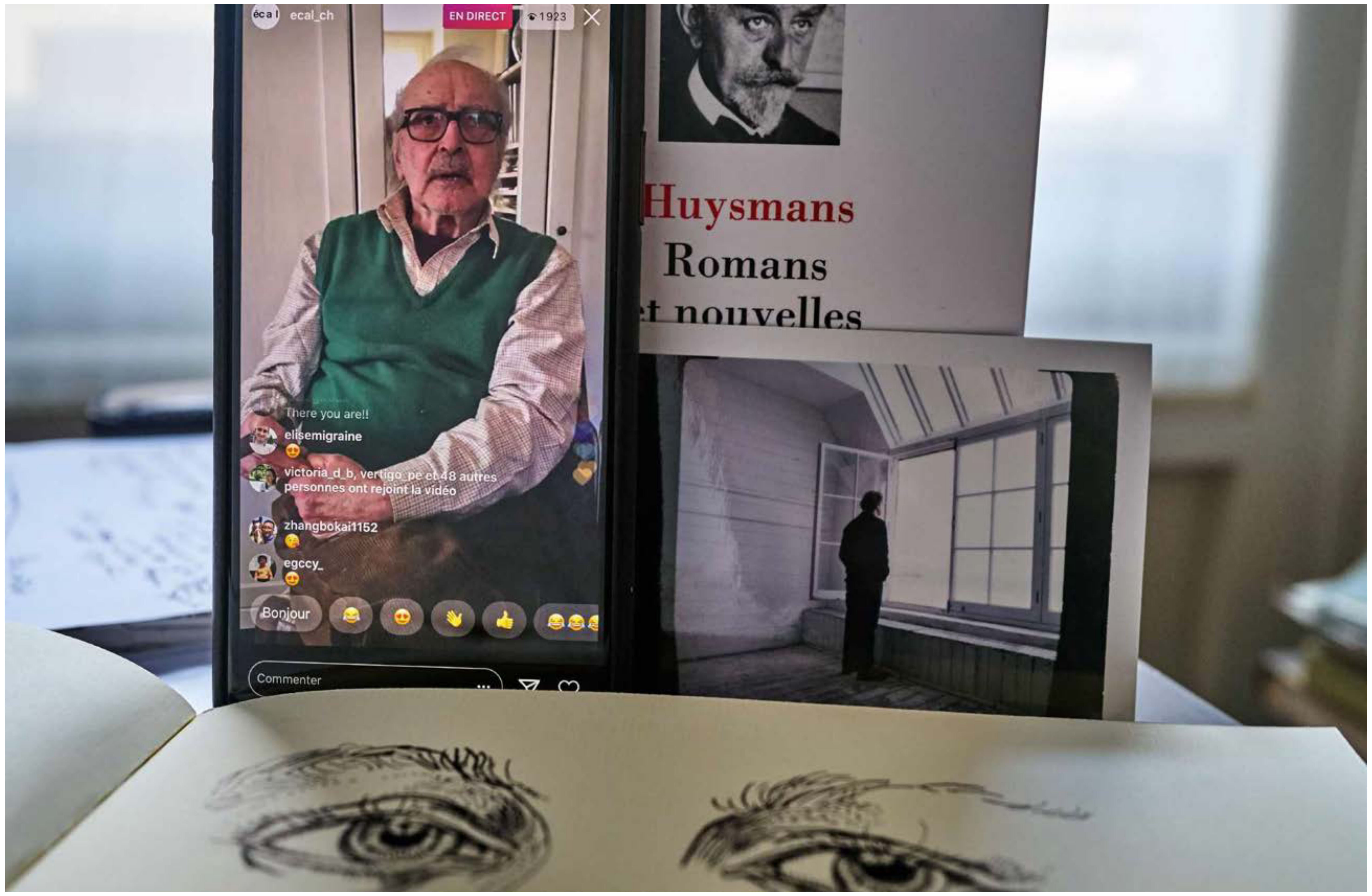
8 p.m.

Ga10

Le Carreau
du Temple
Paris

8 p.m.

An original fashion story by M/M (Paris)
inspired by the Autumn/Winter 2020-21 collection
created by Sarah Burton for the house of Alexander McQueen.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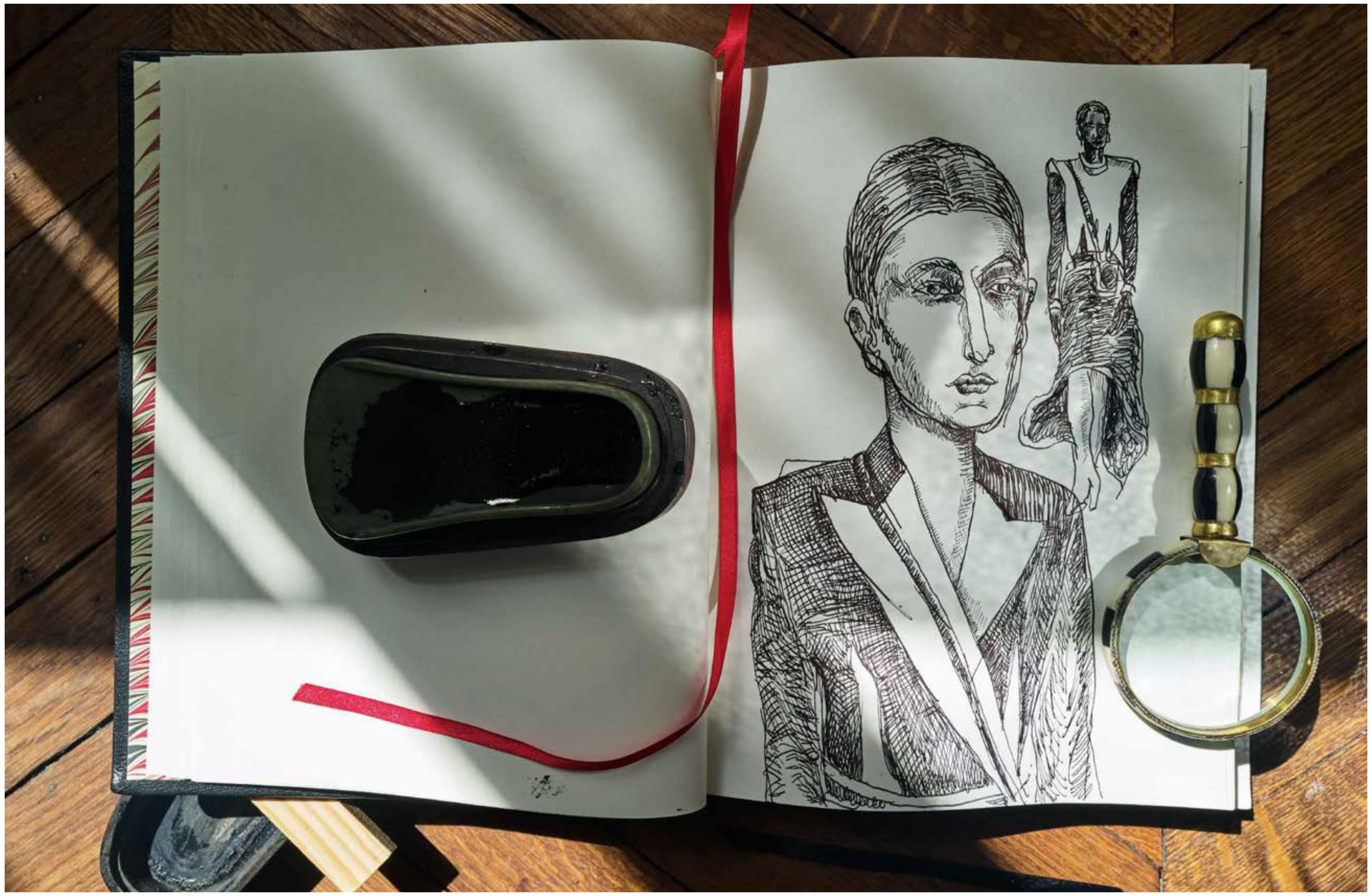

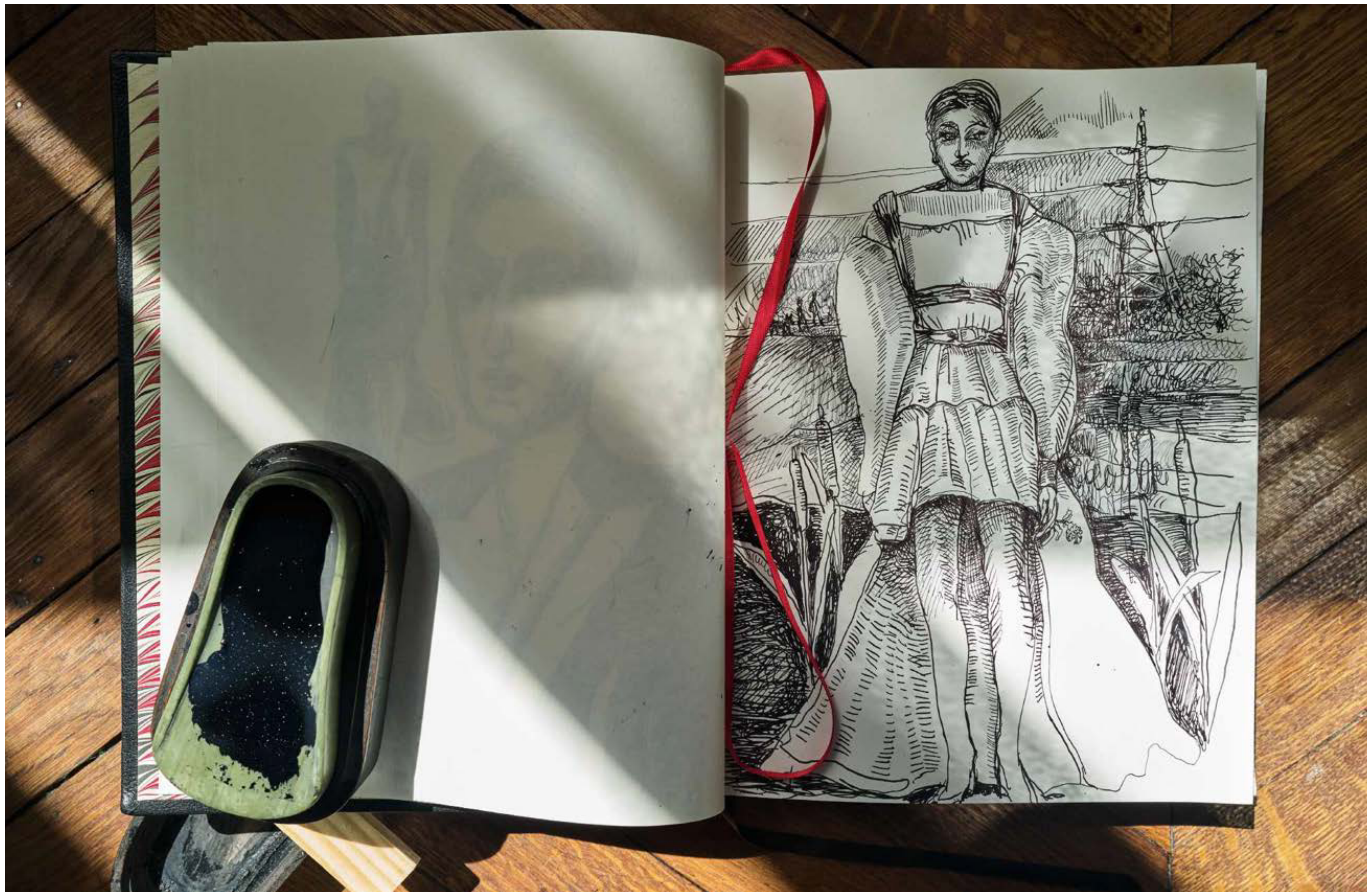

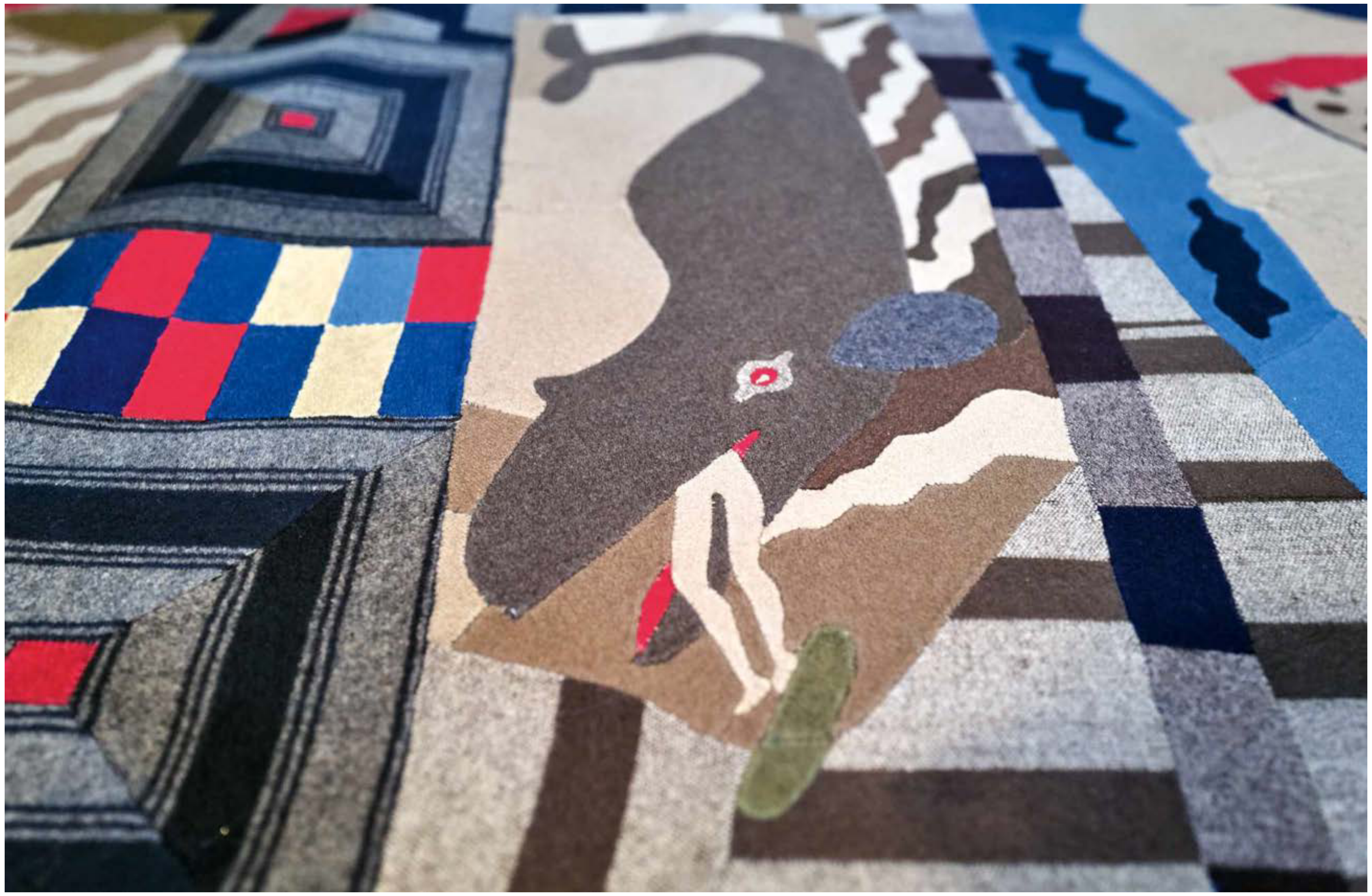

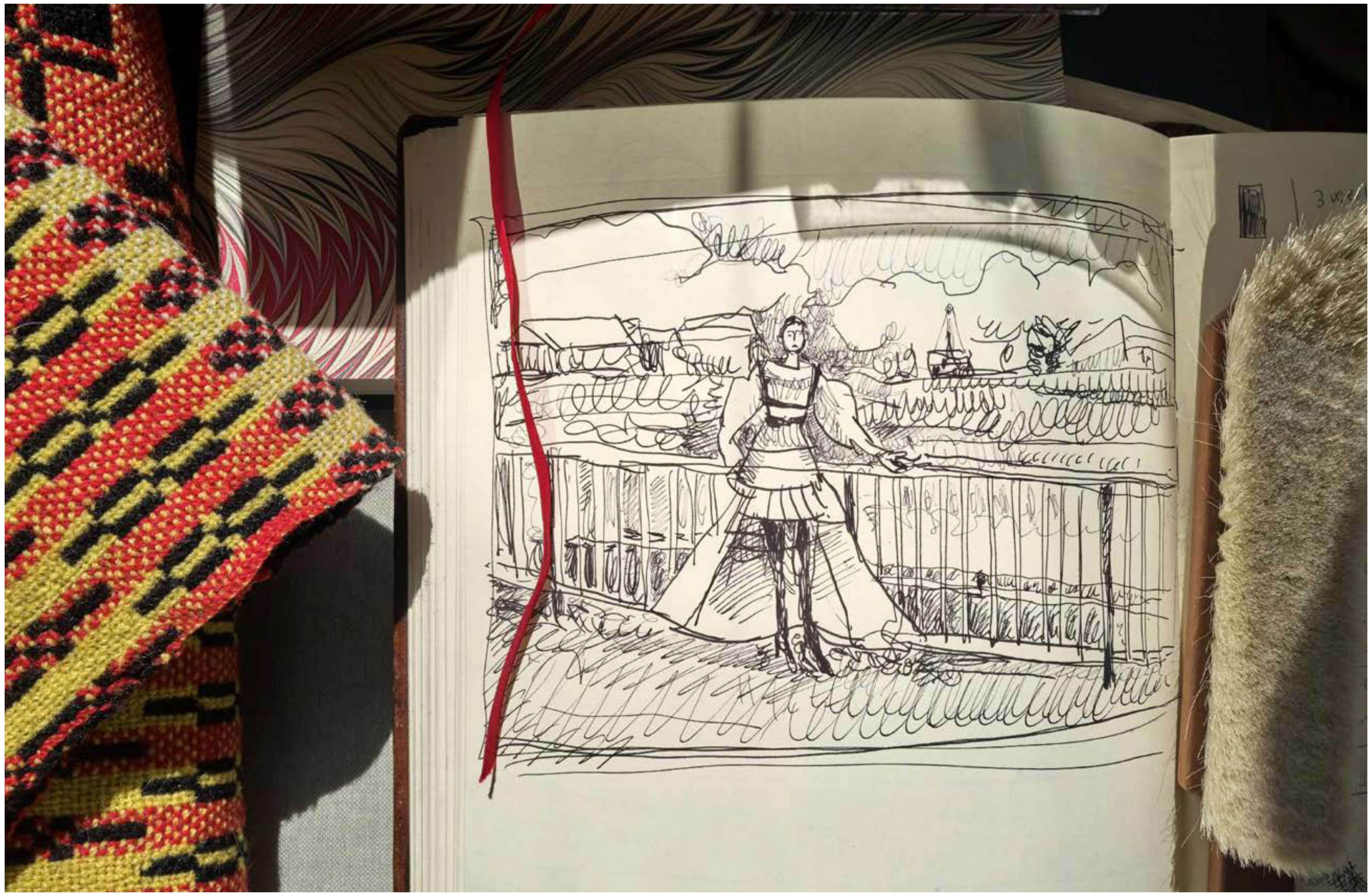

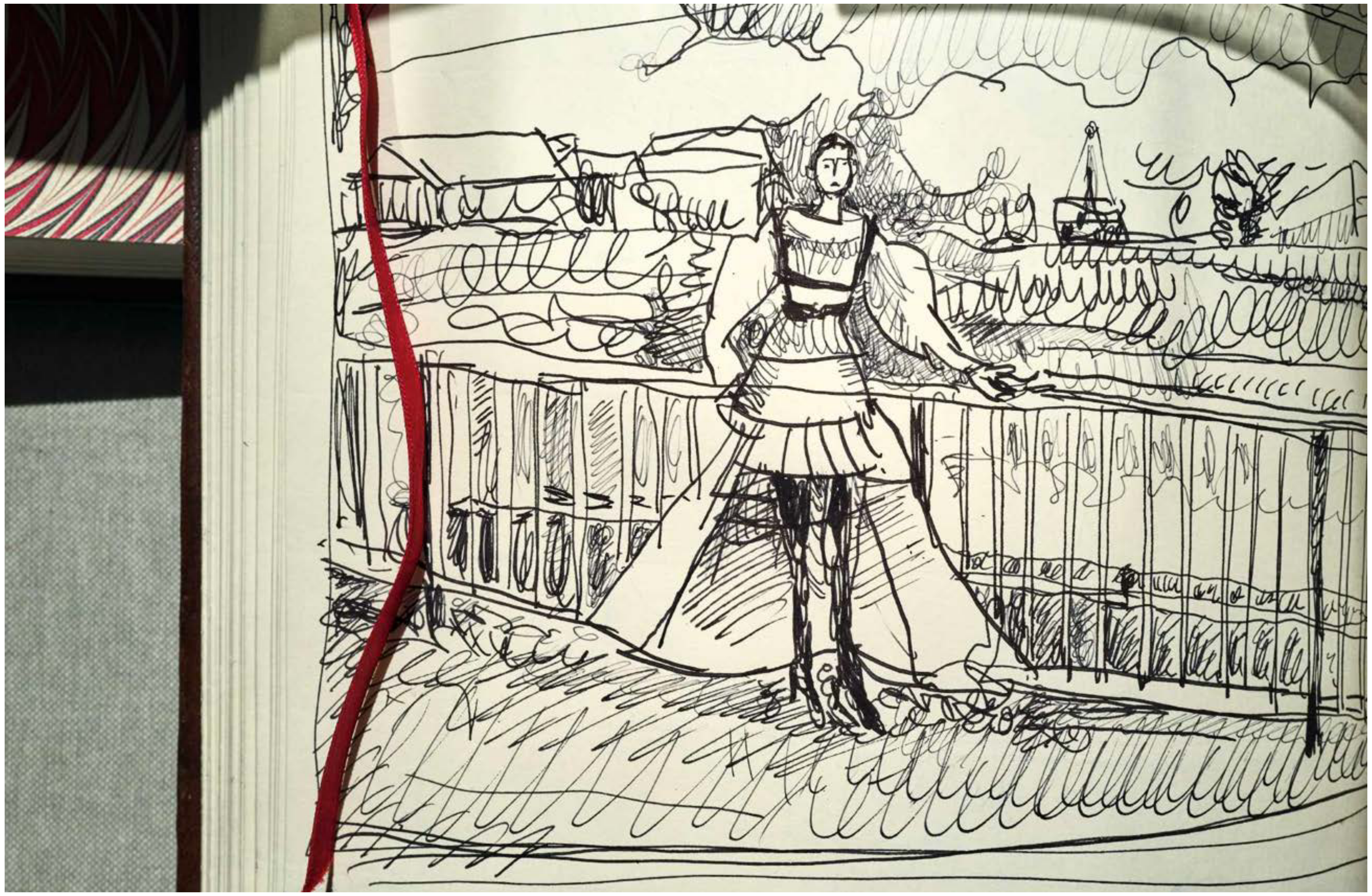

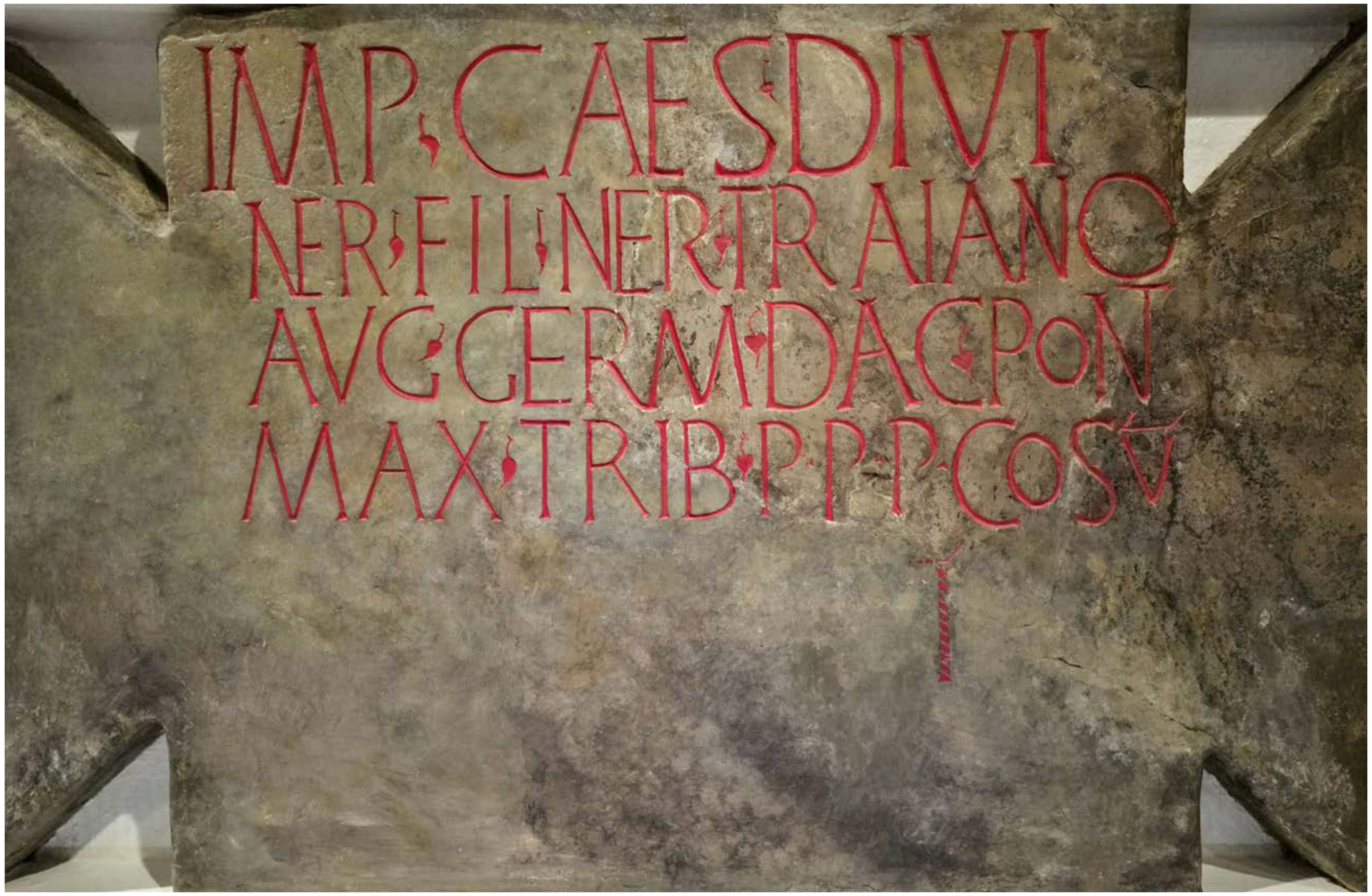

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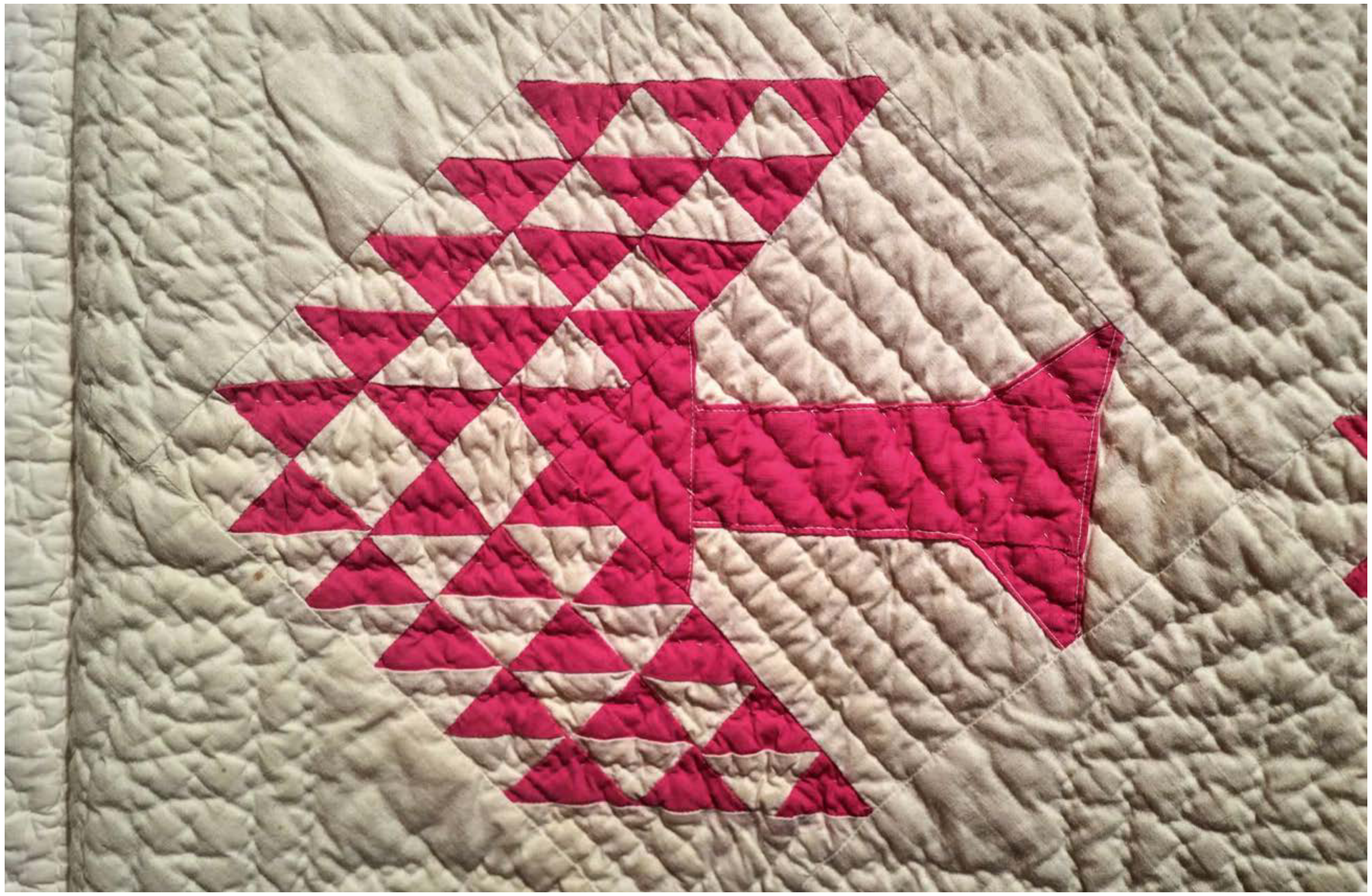
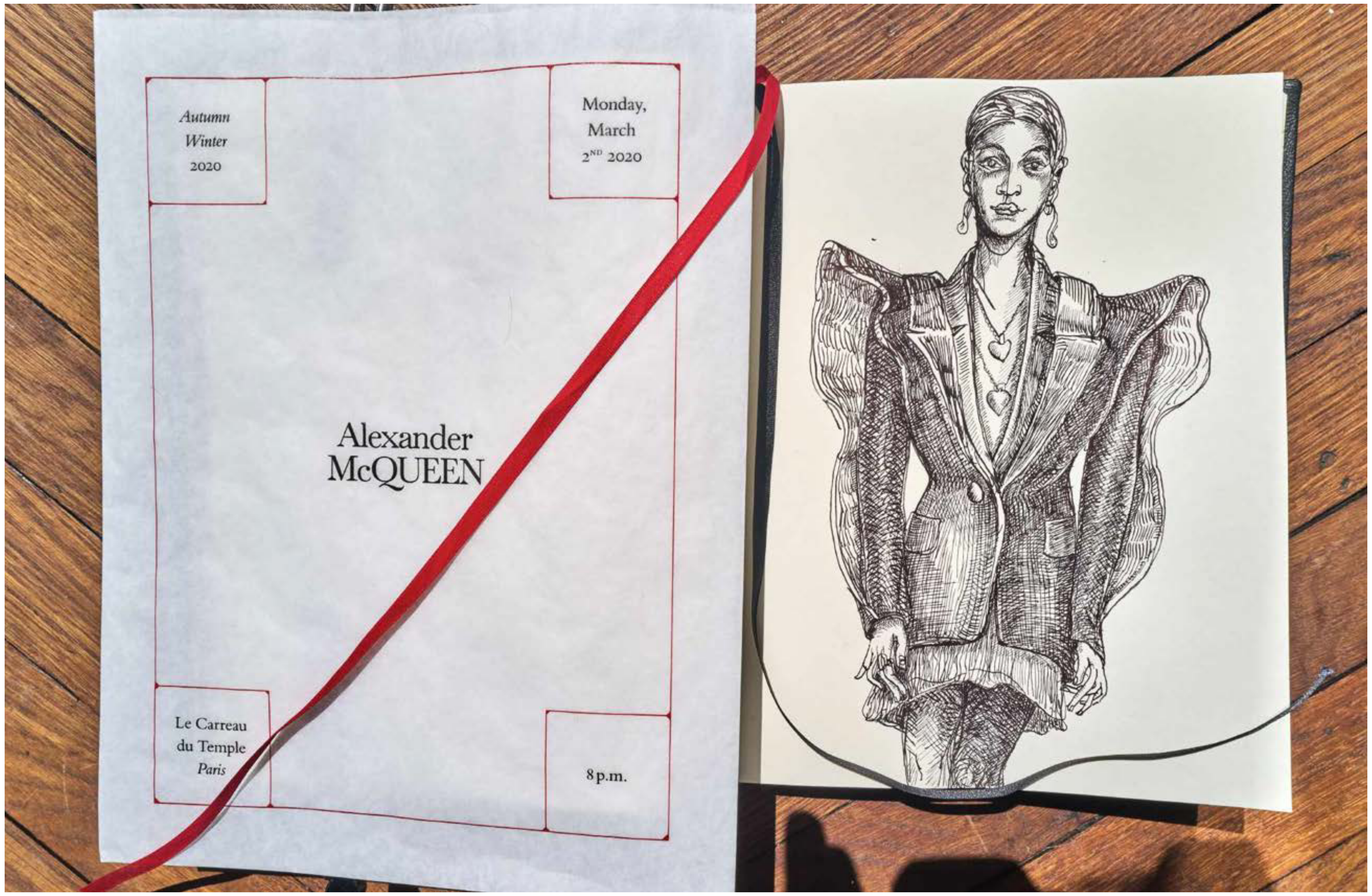




Autumn
Winter
2020

Monday,
March
2ND 2020

Alexander
McQUEEN

Le Carreau
du Temple
Paris

8 p.m.

‘In order for our system to function, we have to plunge completely into the mind of the person sitting opposite us.’

A conversation with
Mathias Augustyniak and
Michael Amzalag of M/M (Paris),
22 May 2020.

Thomas Lenthal: Thank you for the portfolio. I’m very proud to have you in the next *System*. Could you talk us through the project?

Mathias Augustyniak: Thomas, this feels like a session with a psychoanalyst. In fact, you do kind of resemble a shrink.

Thomas: [Laughs] Let’s start the session then.

Mathias: It all started very simply when I saw the Alexander McQueen catwalk show we’d worked on. Michael couldn’t attend…

Michael Amzalag: Because I had non-diagnosed pneumonia!

Mathias: The show was one of the last runway shows of the season. You could feel the tension rising, people weren’t that receptive to the show; they were thinking more about the rise of the pandemic. Italy had already been hit or was in the process of closing. The people came to the show, but it felt like they were more worried about getting contaminated than anything else. Two weeks later, we went into lockdown. Generally, at this period of the year, there are the shows and then the major advertising campaigns that illustrate those shows. So this time around, we thought, ‘Seeing as we’re all going to be stuck at home, we need to find another solution to understand what’s been happening.’ For us, the principle behind an advertising campaign is about both selling the products and visually understanding the designer’s work: it has to format what happens during a show. In that sense, a fashion show is not a performance, but rather a space where information is presented. Before anything else, a show is where fashion people come to understand the objects that are presented to them, which they then transcribe in words if they’re journalists or through images if they’re artistic directors. The portfolio we put together is a visual essay, made with limited means, because we couldn’t travel, that illustrates the most recent Alexander McQueen collection. We were lucky for this project because when we work with Alexander McQueen, we get to take part in the research trips that [the house’s designer] Sarah Burton takes every season before beginning to work on a collection, during which she dives into a different part of the UK. For the last season we visited Wales. These trips aren’t about her trying to be ‘local’; she’s not looking to do an interpretation of anything regional she sees. Rather it becomes the starting point for her inspiration and from which she then extracts specific references. So, we took the images from that research trip – views of Wales – and mixed them up with illustrations of the clothes. It’s not necessary to say exactly where things happen; it’s an allegory that allowed us to create visual and emotional density. There are some images that explain where things are happening: so it’s in Paris, which is why there’s a work table; it happens in front of a window, because we were in lockdown for two months. And there are two views of an empty Paris because I thought it was interesting to put Sarah Burton’s work into perspective, with the idea of her being inspired by Wales, working in London, and then the clothes going off all around the world. That’s how it happened. An interesting point is the first image we see in this visual essay. It’s an illustration, an engraving from a limited series, that shows an image from the previous campaign; it invites us into the new campaign. On the left-hand page, there’s a layout that shows all the typography and graphic work that has been brought into the brand, including a reworking of the logo, to signify the fact that it’s now Sarah Burton operating within this brand called Alexander McQueen, the name of someone who died. That was the starting point. Also contained within that idea is the start of a discussion about what constitutes an advertising campaign. What is a fashion image? What is the work of an artistic director?

‘It takes a lot of work and a lot of time for an idea to ‘ripen’. Every existing philosophy is nourished by other philosophies, all digging for the same thing.’

Thomas: One of the things that characterizes your career is your ability to weave long-term relationships with your clients. It’s like a really long conversation, one that’s very articulated, complex and deep. It’s very sophisticated and unusual in the history of fashion advertising.

Mathias: That’s a way of summarizing what we do or at least the way we approach a project. To that I would add that we also really like having several long-term relationships at once. They all happen at the same time, but we put a lot of effort and deep-dive work into each one. They all exist alongside each other without contradicting or cannibalizing each other, without repeating each other or themselves. But in order for our system to function, we really have to plunge completely into the mind of the person sitting opposite us; we have to do a full survey. Sometimes to understand a story, it takes time, we have to go deep so we can resurface with what we need. That’s how we work with our clients, whether it’s Balenciaga, Calvin Klein, Jil Sander, or a theatre in Brittany.

Michael: Repetition shouldn’t be criticized, though; we have the right to repeat ourselves! As long as there’s nothing formulaic about it. Undoubtedly certain solutions occur that we feel we’re allowed to use again.

‘People often ask why we don’t do things for the big groups and it’s often simply that we like to be able to talk directly to the person we would work with.’

Thomas: Do you have an example?

Michael: The drawn image in the portfolio was and is inspired by the previous season’s campaign. That’s a mechanism we already used at Balenciaga: a drawing from the past can become an image for the future. For Givenchy menswear, too, and for the Loewe relaunch, when we worked with pre-existing Steven Meisel images that had been published in Italian *Vogue*; that famous story inspired by Alex Katz, which was itself already an interpretation. We have this idea of having an interpretation of an interpretation of an interpretation, which becomes the starting point, the mood board. Here, instead of trying to reproduce the interpretation of the interpretation, we decided we’d prefer to show the source, deliberately.

Mathias: It also had an economy of means. Considering the context, the fact we re-purposed and reused was almost an ecology of images and signs. It takes a lot of work and a lot of time for an idea to ‘ripen’. Every existing philosophy is nourished by other philosophies, all digging for the same thing. It was about continuing something that existed before, but that can be reapplied, almost like deciphering another present.

Michael: We can create small and experimental solutions and then use them on a more industrial scale. Another example would be the alphabet, which we used and later reincarnated for a Calvin Klein campaign and later requoted in a more obvious way when we worked with Madonna on *American Life*.

Mathias: It’s like a tool that works, that’s why it’s important to us, it can always be used for something else. Like a grammar. One of the visual essay’s images has an iPhone showing a live Instagram stream of an interview with Jean-Luc Godard next to an image based on a Polaroid from a previous campaign, a lighting test… All these images are associated, it’s like a sentence.

Thomas: I get the impression that you build restrictions into your work. When you’re commissioned by a client, you talk to them and then you yourselves construct the boundaries within which you then work.

Mathias: When someone asks a question, either it makes sense and we can answer it straight away or, if we think the question is badly formulated, the first stage is to reformulate the question in collaboration with the person. Not ignoring what they want but attempting to see it from the outside.

Michael: It’s first and foremost about defining the context in which the signs we will make will appear and knowing how they will circulate. We use intuition and analysis of the context to see which platforms or channels we can use to tell the story.

Mathias: There is a period of listening and research, almost like at the psychoanalysts. You have to listen to the client and hear what they have to say. The hardest thing when we work for a big company is not being able to identify the person who is speaking to us and who we’re speaking to. People often ask why we don’t do things for the big groups and it’s often simply that we like to be able to talk directly to the person we would work with. When we worked with the Galeries Lafayette Champs-Élysées, for example, it worked well because we were talking to the person who was investing in that project – he was taking as much risk as we were creatively. One of the first times we experienced a genuine and direct relationship when working with a big multinational house and brand, was with Calvin Klein. Mr Calvin Klein himself called us up – not a head of a department, not a chief officer of something or other – to express something strong about his brand at that moment. We told him spontaneously what we thought was missing from his brand, and that is why what we did worked. He had understood that his brand’s message wasn’t working, and the work we did gave new strength to his business because it embodied his voice at that moment.

Like, 'I am Calvin Klein and I am still the master of this business – whether you like it or not.'

Thomas: Going back to fashion photography, what makes an image successful?

Mathias: A fashion image is in no way scientific, but at the same time it is very constructed and grammatical. We begin by saying that the person who is photographed and wears the clothes has to be credible as a character. It's a portrait, whether the person is real or imaginary. A fashion photograph is the synthesis of several people's visions. It's like the eyes of a fly: 10 pairs of eyes making one image.

Michael: It's the crystallization of a collective desire in a single place.

Thomas: That's a really lovely way of putting it.

> **'A fashion photograph is the synthesis of several people's visions. It's rather like the eyes of a fly: 10 pairs of eyes making one single image.'**

Mathias: There are lots of fashion photographers, but only a few who can co-pilot a very complex machine. Being able to achieve that level of crystallization is something you can't invent.

Thomas: Photographers have very different ways of reaching that. Steven Meisel, for example, works incredibly quickly.

Mathias: We've worked a lot with Steven, particularly with the project for Loewe, and yes, he works very quickly, like a virtuoso, but he also takes a lot of time to imagine and really invest in each image. He is a brilliant man who always needs to be challenged, and things need to be prepared in advance, so he can perform his solo well. When he arrives, he just pulls everyone along with him. We did studio work with him and we had a seaside set. He arrived, put on some music, got the wind machine going and even sprayed some water, and, for those five minutes, you really believed that you were by the sea with this model. When you talk before the shoot, he'll say, I can give you this and this, because he has a register of all the images he's taken in his mind – and he knows how to create a new image in the space between two old images. That's how we've experienced working with Steven. He understands that the interest of a fashion photo is to make the viewer travel, take the person looking at the image on a journey. David Sims' photos for Helmut Lang did that, too. He photographed his friend and didn't show the clothes – but the image took us on a journey.

Thomas: Do you have any memories of fashion photography from your childhood or adolescence?

Michael: I remember attending a Jean-Paul Goude event at the Fnac Forum [a store in central Paris] where you got a free Citroën poster signed by Grace Jones who was pictured coming out of a mountain. That was 1986, so I was 18. At the time, though, I'm not sure I identified it as a fashion image. It just crystallized something I couldn't name.

Mathias: I discovered fashion images later, when I got to Paris. One of the first things for me was the images that Peter Saville, Marc Ascoli and Nick Knight did for Yohji Yamamoto.

Michael: The Yohji-Marc-Peter triangle made things very clear in my mind.

Mathias: We then talked to Peter and told him that he opened the way for us. And it's why we insisted on meeting Marc, and when he saw our work, he fell for it straight away. Fashion imagery was an entry point; we identified this space as a place to make images.

Thomas: Before that, fashion images hadn't really registered?

Michael: It was later that we understood it. It was when we worked with Marc that we understood fashion through fashion imagery. Before that it had been about images more generally.

Thomas: Like what?

Michael: Mathias and I were spoon-fed artistic experimentation by our parents. I remember going to see *Le Golem* by Niki de Saint Phalle in Jerusalem; that was certainly a visual experience.

Thomas: Mathias, wasn't your father an art teacher?

Mathias: Yes, both my parents were. At my house we always had *Charlie Mensuel* and graphic-design magazines. There wasn't *Pif Gadget*, because they weren't communists. There were photo-reportage magazines, because they developed their own photos.

Michael: We had a dark room in the house, too. It was the era when everyone had an enlarger at home.

Mathias: When we went to Italy, for example, I would have to visit the entire Uffizi if I wanted to get an ice cream. We'd go to Dijon not to buy ginger bread, but to visit the art museum; we'd go to Beaune not to buy wine, but to see *The Last Judgement*.

Michael: Then the Pompidou Centre opened and became the place to go as a teenager. We all had the number of the call box under the escalators there and we'd call each other on it.

Mathias: Our visual resources were

more art based. At the Pompidou, I remember seeing Cy Twombly [in 1988], Ed Ruscha [in 1989], and the exhibition *Les Immatériaux* [in 1985]…

Michael: I must have seen *Les Immatériaux* about 100 times.

Mathias: We arrived in the fashion world through all these other things; we were cultivated but not *that* cultivated. Then by going into the fashion world, with Marc and Peter, we realized it takes time to fully understand these people who are walking encyclopedias. People are very quick to judge the fashion world when they don't know it.

Thomas: Another artistic director was saying there is never enough time to really go deep, but I don't get the impression that's the case with you.

Michael: No, because in theory, our methodology doesn't adhere to the dictatorship of the to-do list or box ticking.

Mathias: It's true that we live in the time of the to-do list. Before you even start a project, you sometimes need to say, 'Maybe we don't need to do too much, maybe one image would be just as efficient.' But there's a sort of one-upmanship, so people think, 'If I put it everywhere, I'll be seen.' But we all know that isn't true. A brand can exist without having put any ads on TV or can exist having only ever done ads on TV; a brand can exist with just one store in Brooklyn. You can exist; the problem is the *fear* of not existing, this terrible fear of not being seen. So even before knowing what really needs to be done, you can end up with this huge, terrifying to-do list. It's like someone gives you a list when you turn 18 with everything you have to do before you die on it. What we try to do instead is find the focal point so we can first work out where we're going.

> **'Before you even start a project, you sometimes need to say, 'Maybe we don't need to do too much, maybe one image would be just as efficient.''**

Thomas: Do you think that this moment, this sort of suspension, will impact the future?

Michael: Once we manage to address the panic in which everyone is drowning right now, at some point we have to redefine how we move forward.

Mathias: It's ultra-important that we can talk among ourselves in a nice way; that's going to be vital. We need to talk to each other, to forget all the legalities and just talk properly, fashion-industry people to fashion-industry people, so we can bring back this desire to the largest number of people.

Thomas: We had reached a point of hysteria before Covid-19…

Michael: I don't want to talk in those terms, because it's easy to say it was too much, and forget that the system in which we work and function has produced things of value. That said, we do need to address how we represent desire when this is over.

Thomas: So it's like a year zero?

Michael: No, because nothing has disappeared; everything is still here.

Mathias: The danger lies in saying that before we were the bad guys and then we've gone through purgatory. There shouldn't be an overly Christian discourse about all this, like before we were sinners. The problems remain unresolved, but we shouldn't deprive ourselves of extravagance. Sometimes things are more pragmatic, others they are more extravagant, both need to coexist. That will be complicated in my opinion. Of course, we can do things in a restrained fashion, but certain things need more breadth and sweep.

Thomas: We shouldn't lose our faculty to be whimsical and idiosyncratic.

Mathias: Exactly. Because that is what, to return to the fashion world, fashion is good at. We do totally random things and those really random things release human emotions.

Thomas: You said a runway show isn't a 'show', but I feel like it is…

Mathias: Our fantasy runway show isn't a big 'show'. I'm not saying they aren't, just that to us they're not like 'shows' or stage plays, they're events unique to the fashion world that allow people to share information and learn.

Michael: They're like fashion brands publishing an annual report every six months.

Mathias: The problem with more and more fashion shows is that there are too many spectators. Recently it has been so much about the spectacle, the 'show', which leaves me cold. It was like being really bored at the theatre and you keep falling asleep. None of it made sense anymore. Certain shows we saw before lockdown had good ideas, but you didn't know where you were anymore. Think back to Alexander McQueen's shows and they were spectacular, but they weren't simply showy spectacles. Yes, they used allegorical fantasy, but they were never *Harry Potter* on Broadway. They had great eloquence, they had a message – and they exuded a sense of *fashion*.

Thomas: That's a good place to end. Thanks so much to both of you.

Mathias: You're welcome. Same time next week for the next shrink session.

The changes to the ground were first made visible
through graphs and diagrams.

On the ground, the human footprint on the planet
suddenly lightened.

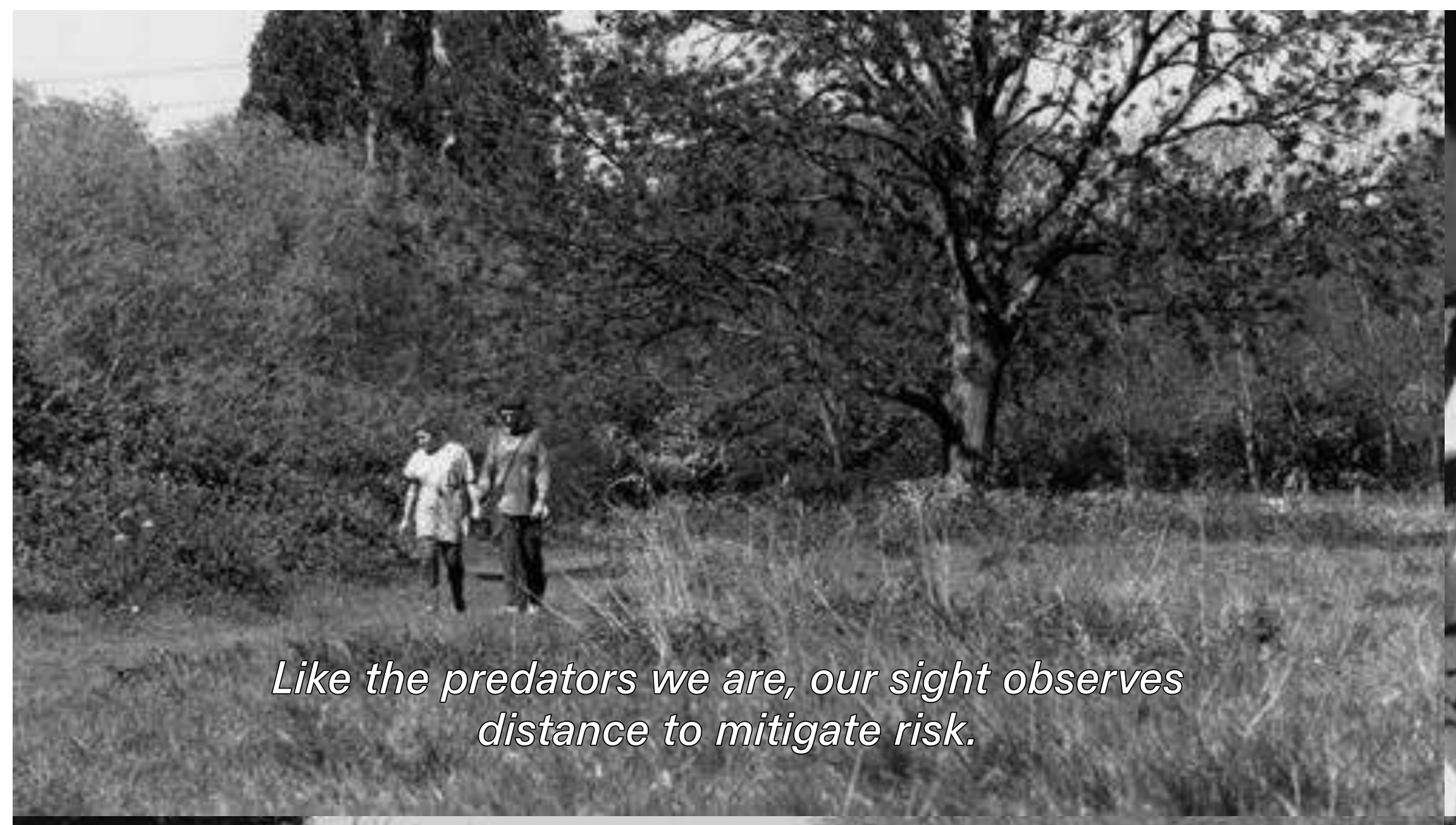
The curves spoke for more than exponential spread.
They signified desertion and collapse.

Beacons of the human experience revealed
themselves as fragile.

A gaze betrays.
The side-eye, a glance up or down, draws the line of a confession.

People paced, walked, jogged and ran,
resisting stillness, and resisting shame.
Spring, springa, ursprung.
Subsidy became a form of subsistence,
and new dependencies bloomed
in the long, distant present.
As some marched forward, not glancing back,
others found solace in close-looking and close-listening.

Whatever direction we choose to face,
we tend to fix forward.



Like the predators we are, our sight observes distance to mitigate risk.

As libertarian governments curtail freedoms,

decades of relentlessly increasing pressure begins to abate

and the fog, the smog, the belts of pollutant that smother and cloud, dissolve

to allow the once-unthinkable to be conceivable.

Emergency begets emergence,

kindling, triggering, inducing, inspiring,

"A poor life this if, full of care

proximity between strangers, separated nonetheless.

A collaboration between OK-RM (OLIVER KNIGHT & RORY McGRATH), ESTHER CLOE THEAKER, JAMES TAYLOR-FOSTER made between London and Stockholm April 2020
we have no time to stand and stare."

‘Our background is definitely not in fashion; we’re from a more art-based and critical-culture background.’

A conversation with Oliver Knight and Rory McGrath of OK-RM, 5 May 2020.

Thomas Lenthal: Could you walk me through your portfolio?

Rory McGrath: We haven’t really explained it to anybody, so this should be interesting! Obviously we’re in a complicated time, and one of the things that intrigued us about your invitation was that you were interested in our reaction to that. When we work with fashion, we really think about storytelling and articulating the philosophies and the ideas that are emerging around whatever we are working with. In this case, it was all about the current situation; it’s all about the ideas and reflections that are emerging around us. On one hand they’re very local, so it’s very much about what we see in our own little communities. But we’re also obviously in touch with friends from all over the world, and we’re sharing big ideas. Big reflections. There’s this kind of beautiful tension between this very local, very small world and big-world thinking and reflections. So that’s what it’s about. It’s about Esther Theaker, a photographer we often work with and who is based here in London, five minutes away. We work with her on our projects for ALYX, as well as on our self-initiated and personal projects, too. We are friends and we work together effortlessly. She has a really beautiful honesty in her photography; she is really against anything contrived. It’s not point-and-shoot, because she really takes a long time to observe situations, often quite peacefully, finding moments in everyday situations. That’s what this is about: it’s her in Hackney Marshes, which is a park here. We felt that the park was very important, because that’s what everybody has been doing, rediscovering the nature around us. And London is full of it. This area, Hackney Marshes, is like being in the middle of nowhere. People are there exercising or walking with friends. We were up there just before the shoot took place, and it’s so beautiful. Now, for the first time in a long time, strangers are acknowledging each other up there. In places like London, there’s often a tension with that.

‘John Baldessari is the master of the word and the image, and how the relationship between the two can create a powerful message.’

Oliver Knight: One of the things that we’re interested in was about how it’s such a personal time. How people are getting really down to basics, doing really normal things. Everything feels more private; even if you’re in public, there’s a privacy to it. That contrasted with the subtitle, which started off with us taking extracts from the news. Things that we read that we really enjoyed. James Taylor-Foster then wrote and added to it.

Rory: James is a curator in Stockholm, and we are working together on a few projects at the moment, all around empathy. James is really good at being a companion and spotting moods, like the moods that surround us. We talked a lot about empathy with our collaboration. So this is a text that also deals with that. It deals with the sense of how do you propose empathy? How do you create a sense of empathy?

Oliver: With how it relates to fashion. We essentially see fashion as a vehicle or a platform for communicating ideas, but this is a key moment for communicating something that’s more related to life than it is directly to fashion. It is an opportunity to talk about ideas.

Rory: And we were really excited by the context that *System* has; it’s so powerful. So placing a work like this inside *System* is really exciting for sure.

Thomas: Is the film-still aesthetic something you’ve explored before? It does resemble a number of film stills collected together, which creates a strange narrative. It’s really compelling and interesting. It even reminded me, perhaps because I’m not English, of *Blow-Up* to a certain extent. Your portfolio felt very English and still fashion-related. I think I’m over-reading it, but it just felt related to something from the 1960s.

Oliver: We work as art directors and graphic designers, and we work on bigger branding projects for fashion brands. We work in many contexts. It’s not something we have a huge background in. Our background is definitely not in fashion; we come from a more art-based background and critical culture. That gives us a slightly different perspective to maybe a few other creative directors who you have in the issue.

Rory: We’re interested in constructing narratives in all forms and all approaches. We love when narratives are taken out of context or are placed in other contexts. A film still with subtitles is such an amazing vernacular because you really appreciate the image of that moment in a film. It feels like a discovery: you discover the relationship between this subtitle and the image. It’s beautiful because it wasn’t designed – it just happened. That’s something that we really love. If you Google Godard or *nouvelle vague*, you find so many beautiful stills, and often they’ve been put into a sequence.

Thomas: Chris Marker’s *La Jetée* comes to mind, obviously. Another question: do you find restriction interesting or even necessary for you when it comes to creative work?

Rory: We love it. Without constraints there is no game. We’re very interested in the constraints that exist, but also the constraints that exist within our conceptual methodology.

Thomas: How do you build self-imposed constraints?

‘An interesting image can’t feel as though it’s been too hard to create; it has to feel of that moment. It has to be uncontrived to be successful.’

Rory: In many ways, you develop them. We work a lot through metaphors and we like to think of what we are making as a kind of performance. We’ll develop a situation we have in mind, which has constraints within it. It’s like a stage in a theatre, which obviously has many constraints; it’s very much about that defined space. We work a lot with the imaginary in that way; we develop metaphors that have constraints. We also are really interested in the way in which predefined systems are set up. In fashion there are many. The industry has all these systems, like lookbooks or campaigns; it’s full of them. If you can start to, in a sense, dance with these restrictions, and find ways to weave projects into those situations, then you can on one hand meet the requirements, while actually doing something different.

Thomas: Nietzsche said that liberty is like dancing in chains, which I think is a splendid image.[1]

Oliver: That’s a nice quote.

Rory: I’m going write that down!

Thomas: [Laughs] I think it’s a beautiful quote. I haven’t thought about it in a while, but it came to me listening to you. What in your eyes constitutes a good fashion image or even more widely, a good image?

Oliver: One thing we certainly try to avoid is simply adding a layer of decoration to something. The work shouldn’t be decorative; it should add an essential quality, and a meaningful purpose. If the image comes from an idea, then I think it has a chance of being a great image.

Rory: There’s also a heavy aspect of rationality in making images, too. The fact is that many things make an interesting image, but ultimately, I find the idea is an interesting way to define it. An interesting image can’t feel as though it’s been too hard to create; it has to feel of that moment. It has to be uncontrived.

Thomas: It needs to look graceful.

Rory: Yes, it’s graceful: it just happened; it was that moment. We work conceptually to create space in which we can create improvised situations. We don’t like to be on a fashion shoot where we’ve had to be very specific about the particular shot that we’re trying to get in advance. That feels contrived to us. We want to see what happens in that moment.

Thomas: Do you have a lot of commercial clients willing to embark on that ‘adventure’ with you? It must entail them being ready to embrace things as they happen, rather than anticipating exactly what will be produced?

Rory: We do, but I don’t know if that’s because we’ve always had that kind of willing client or whether we managed to find a way to get them to agree to that. Matthew Williams [of ALYX] is a fantastic collaborator; we work together a lot, and we’ve made a lot of fashion imagery together. He just totally trusts us at this point, because we spend a lot of time on the presentation of the overall concept of ALYX. It means that by the time we get to a shoot, we all know.

Thomas: So you work with words, not with images, when you’re explaining to your client what it is you’re looking for?

Oliver: I know other art-direction studios really seek out the perfect image reference, but we don’t do that. We try to articulate an idea, and so of course, bring in image and textual references. We write a lot to communicate ideas.

Rory: Unless the concept is, of course, to recreate an image, which can be a concept, too. A literal concept.

Thomas: Was there a defining image or reference that you look back on as having being instrumental in projecting you toward a career in art direction and creative direction?

Oliver: John Baldessari is not from a fashion background, but he is like the master of the word and the image, and how the relationship between the two can create a very powerful message. He is a major influence for me; it’s amazing conceptually, and there’s also a healthy dose of humour.

Rory: We discovered conceptual art when we started to collaborate at art school 20 years ago. Joseph Kosuth was key with his ideas that semantics and semiotics describe and construct objects, like the definition of a chair, the image of a chair. It's very much part of our practice, conceptual art, conceptual thought. We really are in that lineage. We naturally think that way.

Oliver: If you look at an artist like Sol LeWitt, for example, he actually never made the work himself. He would plan it and then he would create the instruction to make it, which meant that whoever was taking it on could deliver it. In some ways it's a little bit like brief making, and as art directors, we spend a lot of time making briefs, so that the people we collaborate with have a structure to their work.

'You can't cruise up to Jonathan Anderson and say, 'Hey, what we're working on now, we just felt like it!' You have to bring reason to your intuition.'

Rory: We also spend a lot of time designing methodologies. Branding doesn't actually exist; it's really just someone saying to you: 'Can you give me proof that we will be working together in a consistent manner?' That doesn't even need to come through form, though. It's really about designing a conceptual system and designing a methodology.

Oliver: We are always creating an image to *go* somewhere. Whether a publication or a book, and we also have an imprint. So we're always thinking about how what we produce is going to end up. When working on an image for a brand, for example, we're thinking, where is that image going? Is it an editorial? A book? A campaign?

Rory: That's something that we design. With ALYX, for example, we created a series of books called *Preparation*, one of them is a chapter in a season, and the activity that happens in and around the collaboration. It's something we publish that brings a cultural context, and it's made for less than the lookbook that used to be produced. It has nothing to do with looks, rather it's part of the space we designed for how the brand communicates and works.

Thomas: What part of what you do is purely non-verbal intuition and what part is conceptualized?

Rory: We basically have intuitive starting points to everything. Then we try to find reason based on that intuition, and that reason helps us to work with others, too. Because you can't just cruise up to Jonathan Anderson and say, 'Hey Jonathan, what we're working on now, we just felt like it and it felt good!' You have to bring reason to your intuition. That's how creativity works, isn't it? If you think about being a theatre director, you might have a feeling about a performance you want to create, but you need to give instruction to your actors, you need to think about the lights. You need to articulate your vision.

Thomas: That makes sense. In general, are you aiming at a niche audience of insiders or do you prefer appealing to a wider audience?

Rory: We are not frightened by large audiences or global anything – but we are frightened by bureaucracy. We have to find our way in, in the right way. We only really work with the owners of things. So if Giorgio Armani called us and said, 'I want to work with you', then great. But it has to be the owner.

Thomas: Which person in the fashion industry do you most admire and why?

Rory: There are all the classics and I'm sure that's what everyone says. I mean within the fashion industry I really respect Miuccia Prada, and Rei Kawakubo is great. They are not always about fashion, fashion, fashion, but more about fashion as a platform for expressing ideas. They both did that so successfully and also without losing integrity. They have a kind of myth.

Oliver: There's Yohji Yamamoto, as well. What I like about his work is that he's not doing whatever the market wants; he has a vision. He's essentially playing with the same idea, the same silhouettes, the same materials, the same colour palette. He's just evolving beautiful expressions of an idea over a very long career.

Thomas: Speaking with you, I get the feeling that fashion culture is not something that is necessarily a huge and constant presence in your minds. It feels like there's a drawer with fashion and sometimes you look into it because it might be handy or useful, but it's not like you're engulfed in it at all. Am I wrong?

Oliver: Fashion is an amazing platform; it has a huge visibility. So, while we're not embedded in fashion culture, we really appreciate the opportunity that it provides us.

Thomas: As things gradually return to some level of normality, will your impulse be to explore notions of fantasy and escapism or will you be more inclined to double down on realism and documenting the moment?

Rory: Realism!

Rory: I mean you can tell by the piece we made for you. There's an element of realism that, of course, doesn't turn its back on what imagination and fantasy can do to realism.

Oliver: We're interested in confronting it rather than escaping from it.

Thomas: Are you itching to get back to the pre-Covid-19 processes?

Rory: There are going to be some terrible constraints, financially especially. Which will be tedious and a shame. Negotiation is not the best part of any project, so we hope that doesn't become a major issue. I don't think it will go back to how it was, though. Before it happened, we were really in the flow of the fashion calendar for a while – going to the shows, going to fittings, you know – and it got a bit boring. Everyone we are speaking to – all our clients and collaborators – is sort of admitting that. It's very unlikely that we will just go back to that. There will be the opportunity to rethink. For example, we will have to see if the things we're currently making still work. We are making JW Anderson's show, which will now have to be handled in a completely different way.

Thomas: I suppose you can't tell me about it right now.

Oliver: We know where it's going but we're not allowed to tell you!

Rory: It's a real opportunity, because in the end there's not a lot for a creative director or an art director to do for the fashion show anyway.

Thomas: You could do the decor, you could do the set, which I think is desperately missing from fashion shows.

Rory: I agree.

Thomas: Creative directors should be a lot more involved in that part of the industry. Seeing the filmed versions of these huge, massively expensive shows is dispiriting; they're so empty. Artistic directors should start making these films now.

Rory: Definitely. That's an exciting aspect for sure. At the last ALYX show, we actually developed a really unusual project, which, now I think about it, wouldn't have happened if there hadn't been a show. We developed a new hair and make-up mirror with [hair stylist] Gary Gill, Alexander Sherborne, who's an industrial designer, and Matthew. That was really satisfying, then we did a shoot using the mirror after the show with all the models when they came and sat down; it's going to be published in *Another Man*. What we've begun to realize is that there were different ways to feed off the show moment. The book we did, *Preparation*, is also a result of that. Behind-the-scenes photography since Juergen [Teller] and Helmut Lang and that whole moment has always been an inverted kind of thing. For the shows, it would be great to get into the concentric circles that exist around the presentation. Both on a level of what you were saying and how we mediate it, as well as everything else that happens. The potential is considerable.

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1. Friedrich Nietzsche's phrase 'dancing in chains' comes from his discussion of Ancient Greek artists, poets and writers in *The Wanderer and his Shadow* (1879). 'Dancing in chains,' he writes is a 'trick they wish to show us [...] first to impose upon themselves a manifold constraint by means of the earlier poets; then to invent in addition a new constraint, to impose it upon themselves and cheerfully to overcome it, so that constraint and victory are perceived and admired.'

VIRTUAL ESCAPISM

Screen captures by Anja Rubik and Ezra Petronio.

A homage to, and with Zoom virtual backgrounds
by Joel Meyerowitz, Guy Bourdin, William Eggleston,
Hiroshi Sugimoto & Luigi Ghirri.
Shot in confinement in Paris and Warsaw, Monday April 20th 2020
between 9:30am and 12:30pm.

All clothing, Saint Laurent by Anthony Vaccarello.

TRKEAM

‘I don’t have the pretence of saying that I am an artist.’

A conversation with Ezra Petronio, 29 April 2020.

Thomas Lenthal: You were the first to turn your work in! So let’s start by talking about it. Can you give me some context?

Ezra Petronio: The first time I saw this whole idea of shooting from distance was with my daughter who’s 15, who was doing these really beautiful portraits of friends via FaceTime. They were genuine and real; it was not about playing with the medium – it was truthful. Then we all started doing things like that, I actually did a Zara still-life shoot that way. So I thought maybe we could try and push it one step further and do something with a great model – Anja Rubik, who I’ve worked with since she started – and then play with and celebrate this idea of virtual images. Then there’s the idea of our future communications being on Zoom, with its virtual backgrounds, so I was like, let’s embrace the fakeness of it, but let’s try and conceptualize it and try to pay homage to all those great photographers who spend days and days photographing the beautiful landscapes we’re all dreaming about right now. It was fun to spend hours on the Internet trying to find, like Gursky, all these great people who spend hours working with their large-format cameras. Then Anja is such a professional model; she is so good. She was outside and played with the sunlight to give it more volume. It’s totally virtual. It’s not the most original idea, but it is something about the now and these virtual landscapes. The credits say screen captures, not photography, because it is meant to be what it is: purely a gimmick. I wanted to see how within a gimmick we could do something inspiring. And it was fun to see Anja work. I was photographing the screen, but she was also doing screen shots. It was all really fun.

‘The whole inception of *Self Service* came from high school. Before it even took a magazine format, it was this idea of defending youthful dreams and ideas.’

Thomas: All in one go, you’ve answered every single question of the first chapter! So another question, about your portfolio, as well as more generally, confinement is just one of the restrictions right now, but can restrictions be useful or even necessary for creative work?

Ezra: Restrictions can be really good. They can narrow down a brief and channel different ideas, and enable you to even be more creative. I remember working for Comme des Garçons a long time ago with a limited budget; we had no choice but to really embrace that and come up with great ideas. It’s the same when we do our magazines; we have limits. Restraints are always quite stimulating. Just look at other media, like beautiful music videos by Michel Gondry or Spike Jonze when they had small budgets yet came up with something amazingly creative. Speaking more particularly about today and the whole idea of confinement, I think it’s all about the now, about having to produce content, exist online – and create noise. We’re going to see a lot of gimmicks and tricks over the next couple of months, and there will be a limitation to what can be done. If we talk about fashion imagery, there is really a difference between good creative content and creating strong fashion imagery. As creative directors, we are there to filter and to come up with great new ideas whether that’s for digital channels or other media. For a brand, regardless of the medium, the imagery has to be strong, timeless and emotional.

Thomas: You are anticipating my questions! So what in your eyes constitutes a good image and has this remained the same throughout your career? And then, how do you achieve this?

Ezra: A good image is something that captures emotions definitively. For me, a strong image is timeless. When we look at our references, as creative directors, when we are creating mood boards for campaigns, what do we put in there? We put in images, fashion images that have stood the test of time, regardless of the period; it could be Avedon or Juergen [Teller]. That’s what an image should be. Some people can do that with a GIF and fair enough, but I don’t think in confinement it is going to be that easy. These fashion images are a collective effort, so we will see when we can go back to that. Doing this project reminded me of a Hans Feurer shoot. He would shoot with a long lens 50 metres away from the model, but it felt like there was no distance. So I think we as creative directors will need to help brands occupy this space and create good-quality content. Once again, good ideas should stay good ideas whatever the medium, whether it is a stupid three-second Insta story or an image that will live on a billboard, so it is up to us to maintain our high standards. A good image needs emotion and it needs time.

Thomas: For you the definition of a good image is that it’s timeless. Has that always been your definition?

Ezra: When I start doing something, I never think, ‘Oh I want this to be timeless.’ I work on intuition and instinct. What has always been exciting is relying on intuition, and sometimes it’s nice to work fast. There’s nothing wrong with that – but it is easier to work fast when you have experience. I’m concerned for younger people who have to produce really quickly without having those filters and that experience, even if sometimes, intuition and the moment can provoke some amazing things. Times are changing; I am not a nostalgic person saying we have to shoot in a certain way. I don’t mind doing shoots and content campaigns in different contexts; it just becomes a little more complex and you have to be a bit more present. When we shoot a campaign, we have 70 people on set one day to produce eight pictures, three films, and backstage videos. More than ever *that* is when people like us, creative directors, have to excel in what we do because we really have to be on top of all that and make sure that everything being produced corresponds with our taste level and what we think is right for the brand. It can sometimes be really tiring, but it is also so gratifying to see and to experience.

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Thomas: Let’s go back to your teenage years. Was there a defining image or reference or person from that time that became instrumental in you working in fashion and art direction?

Ezra: I grew up in a really creative environment. My mom was a dancer and my father was a creative director, so I was always exposed to photographers and stylists and shoots. I wasn’t necessarily into that, but I was really into photography. If there was one defining moment, it would be my last high-school year when my love of magazines was triggered. It was about 1986 and I was at Lycée Montaigne in Paris. There were all these demonstrations, it was really political, and I had some friends who were more liberal than me and others who were more conservative, and I wanted to find a sort of medium. So I started a school newspaper; obviously there was zero funding so we went out and tried to get the financing ourselves. We went to a cookie store and they took an ad; this religious store and they took an ad, too. I got all my friends involved and we did interviews like journalists and I had them writing reviews. Then we Xeroxed it. That was when I realized that the idea of a magazine could mean a lot to people, that it was a great opportunity to express what people around you were thinking. So if there is something I go back to, it’s that. I still have the issue!

Thomas: Was there a specific image that you remember being in awe of? Something that stayed in the back of your mind and became like a nucleus of your vision?

Ezra: I was extremely inspired by street style and styles in music. You’re going to laugh, but I loved Imagination, an old funk band, and I’d wear a bandana and go to La Scala. I was also a mod at one point and *Quadrophenia* marked me a lot, that whole mod aesthetic, the skinhead aesthetic. It was more music-related imagery that touched me most; it expressed an extension of who you were and the dreams that you had.

Thomas: What is most intuitive and what do you overthink in your work?

Ezra: Unfortunately, it’s a combination of both intuition and overthinking. I always allow myself to express what I’m thinking, whether to people around me or to myself. I let things flow, any image, any idea that comes to mind. I don’t self-censor; I don’t fear sounding stupid to myself, so it’s important to be totally free and to follow your intuitive ideas, even if they don’t seem to mean anything, even if you haven’t conceptualized or formalized them. It could be something that touched you in a movie, on TV or a graphic on the street. Then you keep all those ideas and store them in your mind or digitally so you can let them flow out when the time is right. It’s like, you take a snapshot of some typography in the street, and then two years later you realize it’s the exact same font you just used on a fragrance bottle. It might sound silly, but it works like that. It’s really important to let intuition flow. I don’t stop there, though. Then I have to go over it. It’s still not overthinking, but more a second school of thought that I learned from people I’ve worked with, like my 10 years with Miuccia Prada. It’s a process that involves thinking and questioning what you’re doing. The work evolves even if you know it is never going to be perfect. Then, at some point, you have to say stop. It’s a mix of putting out things that are still raw or still evolving and stuff that’s been really overthought and developed. I am so grateful to do something that I really live and love, but if you're passionate about what you do, you think about it all the time. So you can wake up in the middle of the night, not every night, but sometimes you're like, 'Oh shit, that's it!' I have thousands of notebooks of unfinished ideas and thoughts and scribbles that mean nothing. Sometimes you have all those things in your mind, and you wait a day and then they will come out of your mind in a beautifully coherent way, and you sketch it. That is when it is quite beautiful, you know. Back to you, am I a tortured person, doctor? [Laughs]

Thomas: I think it is very healthy; you sound fine to me!

Ezra: There are also different contexts in which we work. There are extremely personal contexts, like the magazines we do, where we are both client and creative at the same time and where we can *really* explore, and then there is our role as creative directors working for brands. I make a clear distinction. I don't have the pretence of saying that I am an artist and I am just going to put my mark on a brand. We are creative people, but what is a creative director if not someone who encapsulates and packages and reveals what the client's message is? And that is what we do with these people, taking the essence of the brief and conceptualizing it, then developing it through a whole series of tools. And there is a certain artistry to that, you know.

Thomas: As a teenager, or even as child, were you always trying to be different and individual, and how do you strive to be different today? Is it a mind set or a method?

Ezra: It's very personal to me. My parents were American, but they moved to Paris and so I grew up there, in a place where we were outsiders. We never really belonged there. We're not French, but we were living in Paris; my name was different. There are a lot of things as a young person that make you aware of not fully belonging to the context you are in. Once again, I was also very fortunate; my parents were into music, we had a lot of influences, both cultural and religious, around us. It was a very healthy environment, so I think that, naturally, my parents were also self-made people. My father opened his own company, my mother opened her own dance studio, and we were left to take control of what our lives were about. We went to school, but I was always the one wanting to start a band. I really loved creating things, like the magazine; it was always about that. The whole inception of *Self Service* came from high school. Before it even took a magazine format, it was this idea of gathering together different creative worlds and defending that. I always had this idea of defending youthful dreams and ideas. In that sense, this idea of entrepreneurship, it pushes you to be a bit different and to break from the norm.

Thomas: It becomes second nature after a while. In an ideal scenario, do you want your work to appeal to a more niche demographic or are you aiming at a wider audience?

Ezra: That evolves with our careers. The early days are all about exploring and building your credibility and your experience in the field you choose and so you go through the steps of trying things. Quite soon, fashion became one of the main industries we were working in and I am so lucky to have done that for years and years. I am not interested in self-promotion, because working with mentors like Prada and Comme des Garçons, and Lagerfeld, all these different designers, feeds me. Once you have mastered your craft, you always try to surprise yourself. Working for a niche is one thing, but then why shouldn't something mass market be as emotionally appealing as something niche? If you can do a great Balenciaga or Chloé ad, why can't you do a great one for Zara or Apple? When I was art director at Chanel and working with all the different divisions – fragrance, beauty, skincare, watches – I remember getting a brief to work on Allure [fragrance] as it was losing market share to Dior. They basically said you can reinvent anything you want. So I said, 'Wait a minute, you have a boat, you have an actor, we don't need to reinvent. Why don't we just take those same ingredients and find a way to rework it in a beautiful way?' We did it with Bruce Weber and made something super strong that appealed to both the niche and the mass market. It's even more beautiful if you are able to bring that level of quality to work with brands and help them to achieve a level of creative excellence that answers the brief, sells the product, *and* touches people. Today I'm more interested in that, because I have done more niche things, and I prefer a challenge.

'Rei Kawakubo would ask us where the rest of our presentation was and we'd say, 'In the garbage can!' She'd say, 'Well, go get the garbage can!''

Thomas: It's an American quality, bringing class to the masses; the best example was the golden age of Hollywood when they created amazingly sophisticated works of art that appealed to everyone, whether they were a college professor or a janitor. That feels very American. The British did it to a certain extent by coming up with their version of pop. The French are not that gifted in that; for them, culture is high or low and you can't bring high to low. Whereas the Americans were amazing at that and so were the British, and that is why we were always very impressed with what comes out of the Anglo-Saxon world in terms of pop culture.

Ezra: I think you're right.

Thomas: Which person in the fashion industry do you most admire and why?

Ezra: The people who really come to mind are those who influenced the way I work. I had a teacher at Parsons called Henry Wolf,[1] an old timer who'd worked at *Harper's Bazaar* with Alexey Brodovitch. That was an era when an art director could use all kinds of media, and Wolf taught us how to think visually and globally, using typography, picking up a camera and not being afraid to use it, using film titles. It was really, really interesting and taught me a lot. It didn't pigeonhole me and taught me that if you are a creative person then everything is possible; you just have to search all over the place and master all these crafts as best as possible. He really taught me what the job of an art director was: it's not just someone who comes up with great concepts, it is someone who has all this culture. Then there were two other people, my first clients: Rei Kawakubo was an amazing mentor in the sense that she really taught us the art of detail, to an obsessive extent. I remember doing an invitation for a show and we were working with Adrian [Joffe, Comme des Garçons president] in Paris and we sent the finished invitation by fax to Tokyo and we got a fax back at four in the morning and she'd scribbled all over the thing with comments, like the RSVP is too small, make it one point larger. And I was like, what the hell? She always really pushed us. For our presentations, she'd ask us where the rest of it was and we'd say, 'In the garbage can!' So she'd say, 'Well, go get the garbage can!' She wanted to see the process. My second mentor was Miuccia Prada, who you've worked with, too. She was absolutely fundamental in teaching me how to question and never to be satisfied, and to explore and try things, but also to know when to stop. That was absolutely stunning. She'd say, 'This part is good, we don't need to go further, but this needs to go further.' It was this idea of process. We're fortunate to work with people like that. It helps us and it shapes the way we are.

Thomas: What does success look like for you?

Ezra: Happiness, I would say. Professionally speaking, success is also reaching a certain point in the work you have produced that you don't feel you need to prove anything any more. We are always very emotional people, so the grass is always greener elsewhere and you never think you have enough. Also, we are in an industry where we are constantly judged; you know, a season goes by and if you haven't produced a great campaign, you are out of the system! When you reach a level where you have really accomplished something and you feel that you could stop and you'd be very proud of everything you've done – that is absolute freedom. Because everything else that comes after that is a bonus, another great challenge and opportunity. That is success for me, reaching that moment when you don't have the pressure – not in financial terms or the everyday reality of running a business – but the pressure of having to prove you have something to say.

Thomas: Describe a professional disappointment and what it taught you.

Ezra: It's disappointing when you can't convince a brand or designer that your idea was better than another. Or worse than that, you are faced with certain clients or certain companies that tend to overthink. I remember a big mass-market fragrance, and after a lot of time and thought, we sold them a concept for a film. The designer was crying, saying, 'You have encapsulated everything that it means to me!' It was a moment of euphoria! Then we went through the spinner and spent a year doing 27 client presentations – 27 presentations! After all that we ended up with something ridiculous, and everyone was unsatisfied. That was annoying and it happens sometimes. Disappointment is more when you are misunderstood, when you are working on a projects for a certain brand or company that has hired you for what it sees is great in you, but then absolutely doesn't trust you to do that thing for them. That is really stupid; it's a waste of time and money and

'Looking back at those pre-confinement days, you'd spend 12 hours in the office and of those 12 hours, how many were actually spent on the work?'

everyone is unsatisfied. That is the biggest disappointment; it's happened to all of us, I guess.

Thomas: When things return to some level of normality, will your impulse be to explore notions of fantasy and escapism or will you be more inclined to double down on realism and document the moment?

Ezra: What is going to happen, I think, is there will be a lot of marketing and there will be consensus around certain values because the fashion industry needs to feel good about itself. They're going to try and create a certain sense of good conscience to connect again with consumers. So there will be all these positive message, like, let's bring the goodness, kindness, hope and optimism, and all that. This is going to be pure marketing, so our job is going to be to bring strong creative work to that, whether it is graphics or photography. In my opinion, it's going to be about the reality, because it has changed. But I don't think fundamentally that I will shoot a campaign differently in September than I might have done before. The process might be different, though; maybe it will be less contrived. Perhaps it will be more about brand image and brand statements and less product driven; there might be things like that that are interesting. But I don't think it will influence me that much.

Thomas: Are you itching to get back to the pre-Covid process?

Ezra: Actually, one thing I've really appreciated, on a daily basis, is the luxury of time and stripping away all the unnecessary stuff from my daily work life. I think I am able to work way better with things being a bit more filtered. Not that I want to work at a distance from my team, but looking back at those pre-confinement days, you'd be spending 12 hours in the office and out of those 12 hours, how many were actually spent on the work? There were so many unnecessary phone calls and meetings. I'm speaking for creative directors now, as we have more control over the processes than CEOs and marketing people, but for us, we are able to work better and find more time to be more efficient and more creative. It's more enjoyable and that is something that I look forward to keeping on after this is over. I'm actually being extremely productive; I am achieving in a day what used to take three days because there are no distractions. I am looking forward to continuing that kind of control over my environment and time.

Thomas: Lastly, and this is a big question, do you think it is possible to be unique today?

Ezra: This is a financially extreme crisis and the luxury industry, which we all work with, has such huge capital and is so dependent on the economy. That is the way our world is set up, so it's going to hit us right in the face. Yes, we are going to be hit, so more than ever we have to try as much as possible to create meaningful support systems for the new generations coming into the industry. It also depends on your age. We are older, we have much more to lose, so we might be more terrified, but if I were younger today, I would see this as an opportunity to be true to myself. Maybe we are going to get our asses whipped by new generations, who are going to want to do this in a whole new way. We have to question how we operate and how we see the next 10 years of our creative lives. Maybe it is time to change things, but for me, it is absolutely about being unique. If you get desperate about it, you are going to get swept away. But then, even being unique you might crash.

Thomas: You will crash beautifully.

Ezra: For us magazines, things are going to be extremely difficult. So, yes, let's crash beautifully.

1. Henry Wolf (1925-2005) was born in Vienna, but fled after the Nazi occupation in 1938. After crossing France and North Africa, he and his family eventually reached New York. After studying at School of Industrial Art, he served in the army. He was appointed art director of *Esquire* in 1952 at the age of 26 and *Harper's Bazaar* in 1958. He later joined advertising agency McCann Erickson before setting up his own creative agency in 1971. His influential visual style was known for its use of typography, often surreal photography and conceptual illustration. He once said, 'A magazine should not only reflect a trend; it should help start it.'

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Douglas
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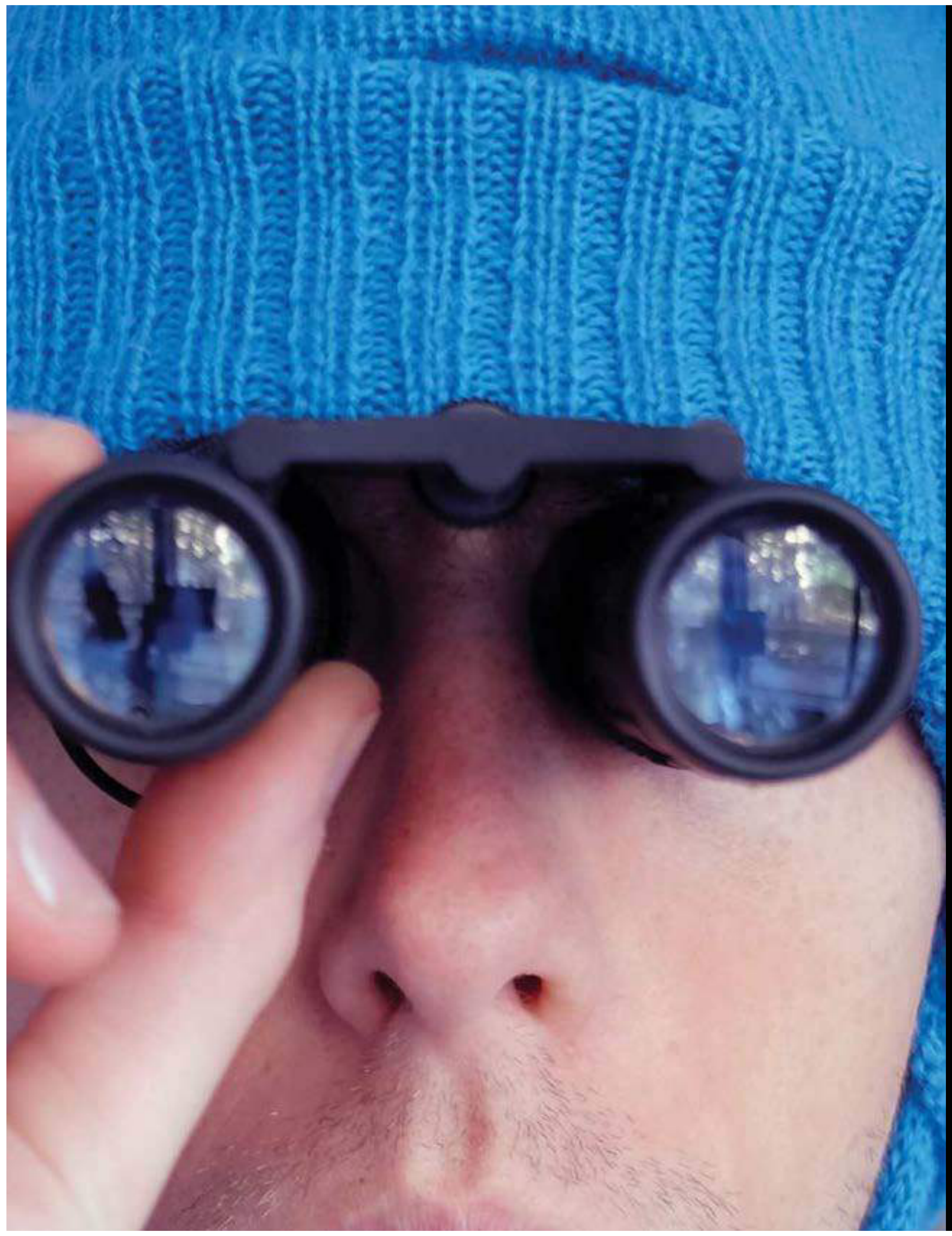

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‘I look back at the images in the early issues of *The Face* and I feel like I know that person.’

A conversation with Jamie Reid, 14 May 2020.

Thomas Lenthal: Can you start by talking me through your portfolio?
Jamie Reid: Absolutely. Collaboration is fundamental and inspiring to me – the people I surround myself with, be they friends, colleagues, artists, designers, photographers, image-makers in general. With this quarantine and isolation, and people being at home, I wanted to form a string of dialogues, a celebration of new and up-and-coming designers and creatives who I admire. I also wanted to do a light-hearted exercise in creating imagery around the restrictions. Who I brought in to collaborate on these projects was also quite considered. I was interested to see how we would tackle this between us, and we’ve managed to take a very different approach to each spread and image in the portfolio.

‘I lean more towards work that feels like it’s capturing a moment, a person or a time. My bookshelf is 70% Araki or street photography.’

Thomas: You ended up collaborating with five different photographers.
Jamie: Some of the teams I already work with and support, and others were new. Some of the projects are a continuation of the kind of language and collaboration we are already in the process of. For instance, having just worked on a film project with Jordan Hemingway and Mowalola, I knew Jordan would be chomping at the bit to create something. We decided that we wanted to shoot Mowalowa herself, because she’s an amazing creative and has got this really strong identity. I wanted to create this mirror image of her kissing herself, as a kind of gesture towards self-love and self-care. We did a FaceTime shoot, did some post-production on that and then re-photographed the FaceTime imagery. I thought that the more reworking and stages in the process, the better.
Thomas: Were you the only one privy to what the other ones had done?
Jamie: Yes, but everyone who worked on this project was already close, so they might have had some kind of indication. I wanted to create something uplifting and interesting and fun that speaks about this time. I also wanted to make it London-centric – because that’s where I’m from, and it inspires me all the time – and about the community of people I work with. I created a mood board and a loose brief or idea for each team, and we rolled with that as we went. It was a very close conversation, but it wasn’t rushed. We approached it with a clear headspace. Everyone has a lot to think about and deal with at the moment, and I wanted to make sure that everyone felt comfortable and inspired by what we were trying to create.

Thomas: Can restriction can be useful for creative work?
Jamie: I’m quite used to working with restrictions. There’s always some kind of limitation with a project. Restrictions can only make you more creative; it’s about finding creative solutions to a problem. It can keep you on your toes.

Thomas: What’s a good fashion image to you?
Jamie: I look for spirit and soul in an image. It can manifest itself visually in different ways, but I have to see that some feeling and heart have gone into it.
Thomas: How do you recognize the emotional truthfulness of an image?
Jamie: As an image-maker, you create a narrative and project it onto a scenario and a character. You build a character that somebody then interprets. That can spark an emotion that you didn’t intend. Look at David Sims’ street casting; what he sees in people and how he shoots them is so inspiring. See the same people through the lens of a different photographer, and it’s worlds apart. I look back at the images in the early issues of *The Face* and I feel like I know that person. That’s really special.
Thomas: The human factor is your thing?
Jamie: I think so. I enjoy fantasy, but I am more drawn towards imagery that resonates with me personally. I have a wide palette of interests, especially in art and photography, but I probably lean more towards documentary or work that feels like it’s capturing a moment, a person or a time. My bookshelf is probably 70% Araki or photography of that area; a lot of street photography.

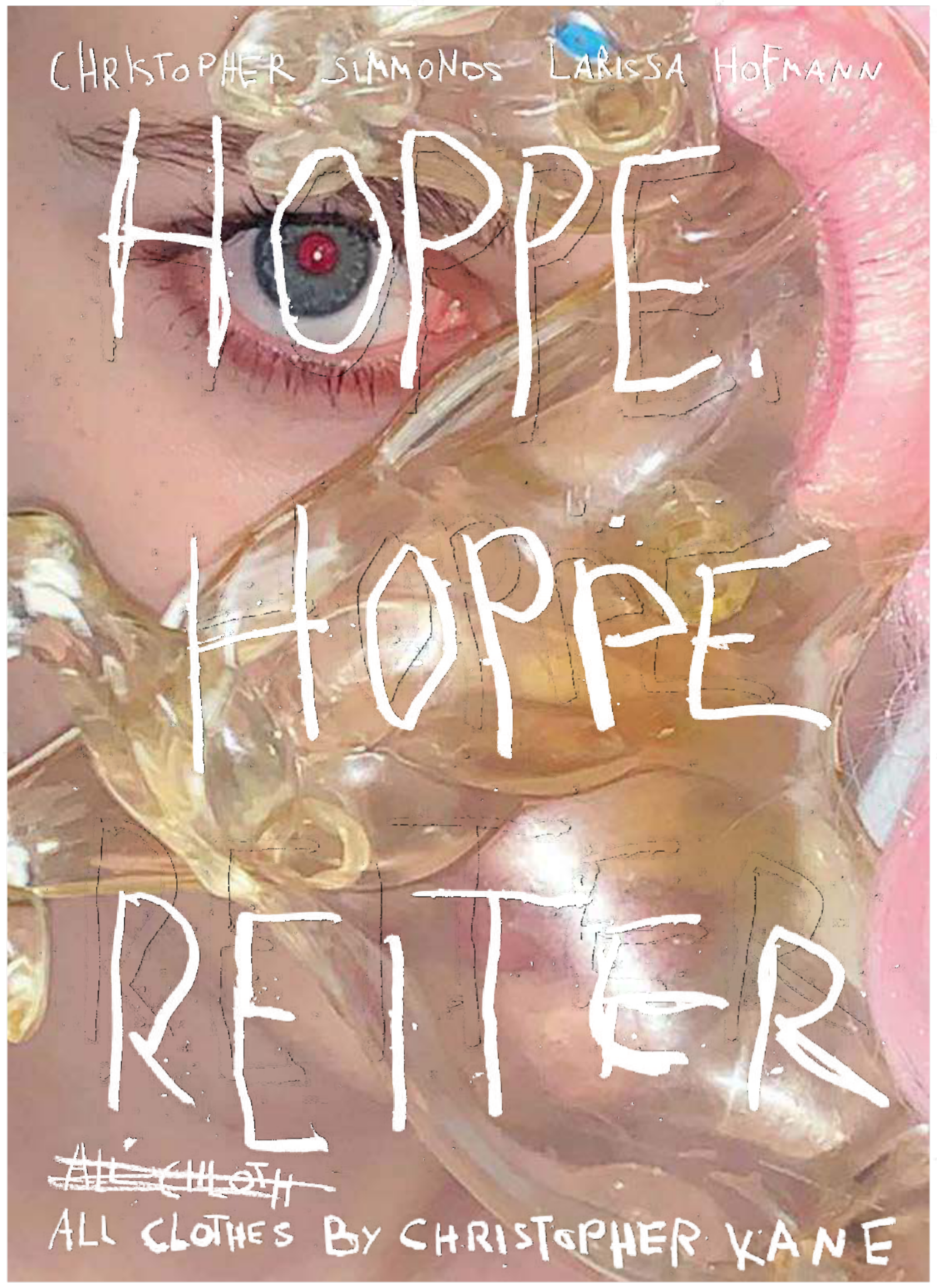
Thomas: Was there a defining image, reference, person or moment from your teenage years that now seems instrumental in your career in fashion, and art direction, in particular?
Jamie: When I was growing up, I always thought I wanted to be an engineer or a mechanic, which is what my dad does. Then I had a bit of a crisis, where I really didn’t know what I wanted to do, and I used to spend all my time at the skate park. I studied graphic design at college, but I didn’t enjoy it much at first. One of my tutors showed me all this Stanley Donwood artwork for Radiohead albums. I really didn’t like it; I think he’s a really good image-maker, but at the time I was, like, ‘I don’t listen to or appreciate Radiohead, and I don’t get the imagery.’ I just couldn’t see the connection. Then I was reading up on Black Flag, through my interest in punk music and BMX. I bought this photobook by Glen E. Friedman, with his photographs of Black Flag on the road, and all these hip-hop artists and amazing musicians. Really cool imagery. I found that so inspiring, the opposite of how I felt about that Stanley Donwood Radiohead album. I love the music of Black Flag; I could see how the music made me feel, and how the music might have made these image-makers feel, and I got that connection. It clicked with me. From there, I took a course in photography and learned how to do some darkroom printing. I wanted to get that really grainy black-and-white texture of all this hardcore gig photography. I almost failed my other college courses, because all I did was focus on photography. I used to just go into the darkroom after hours and work. It was fun for me to print a photo and then apply a design texture to it, and vice versa. Through that, I discovered Nan Goldin and Gregory Crewdson’s work, two different worlds. All the effort and production that went into a Crewdson picture – immaculate lighting, rain showers, a crane – compared to Goldin’s pictures in the back of a taxi. It blew my mind that both these things could inspire me, and they were at such different ends of the spectrum.

‘Maybe what you thought was unique once isn’t now, or what you didn’t could be unique in the future. What might be unique to me, may not be to you.’

Thomas: Which person in this industry, living or dead, do you most admire?
Jamie: In college, we had a lecture by [4AD designer] Vaughan Oliver, and it was amazing timing because I had just gotten into the Pixies. His lecture was so inspiring; it was really cool seeing how much texture and how many layers went into that work. It was special having a conversation with him and funny, too, because he had a bit of a dig at Peter Saville. To me they’re both equal in this field – they made the best album sleeves almost ever, but the music and their aesthetics are so different.
Thomas: What does success look like?
Jamie: I feel successful when I feel inspired or happy, or when I get some emotion out of seeing something. Working on a piece I love, seeing it released, sparks a kind of joy within me. I enjoy collaborations, group conversations, when your excitement is growing and growing. That’s when I feel successful.

Thomas: Describe a professional disappointment and what it taught you.
Jamie: One disappointment was not getting an interview at the Royal College of Art. Neville Brody had just taken over the course, and that was a big reason why I wanted to be there. I was gutted. I was thinking, ‘What am I going to do?’ I was unsure. At that time I was freelancing at a prestigious design studio, I was designing a publication for a great publisher and collector, after which I contacted *POP* magazine, which is where I started working in fashion. I had decided that I wanted to go to the Royal College of Art whatever happened, but looking back, it wasn’t the right thing for me. The exposure to the industry was more fundamental than more studying would have been.

Thomas: Do you think it’s possible to be unique today? Does that even matter?
Jamie: We live in a culture that’s so aware of the past; there’s an encyclopedia of the past available to everyone, and they can choose what to look at. People pick up all these different ideas and kind of create something new for themselves by borrowing from all these little bits. That also applies to image-making. You can throw in all these different elements and even if the ingredients already exist, it’s still possible to create a unique image. If you put enough of your personality, heart, emotion and effort into the work, it will be unique. Maybe what you thought was unique once isn’t now, or what you didn’t, could be unique in the future. What might be unique to me may not be unique to you.
Thomas: Are you interested in going back to pre-Covid-19 work processes?
Jamie: I’m undecided. I’ve benefited from slowing down and taking a little more time with ideas. There’s this Cy Twombly quote: ‘When I work, I work very fast, but preparing to work can take any amount of time.’ That’s how I’m working at the moment: taking time for myself, putting my thoughts on paper and trying to create something. I hope that can continue.
Thomas: You’ve rediscovered the beauty of pondering.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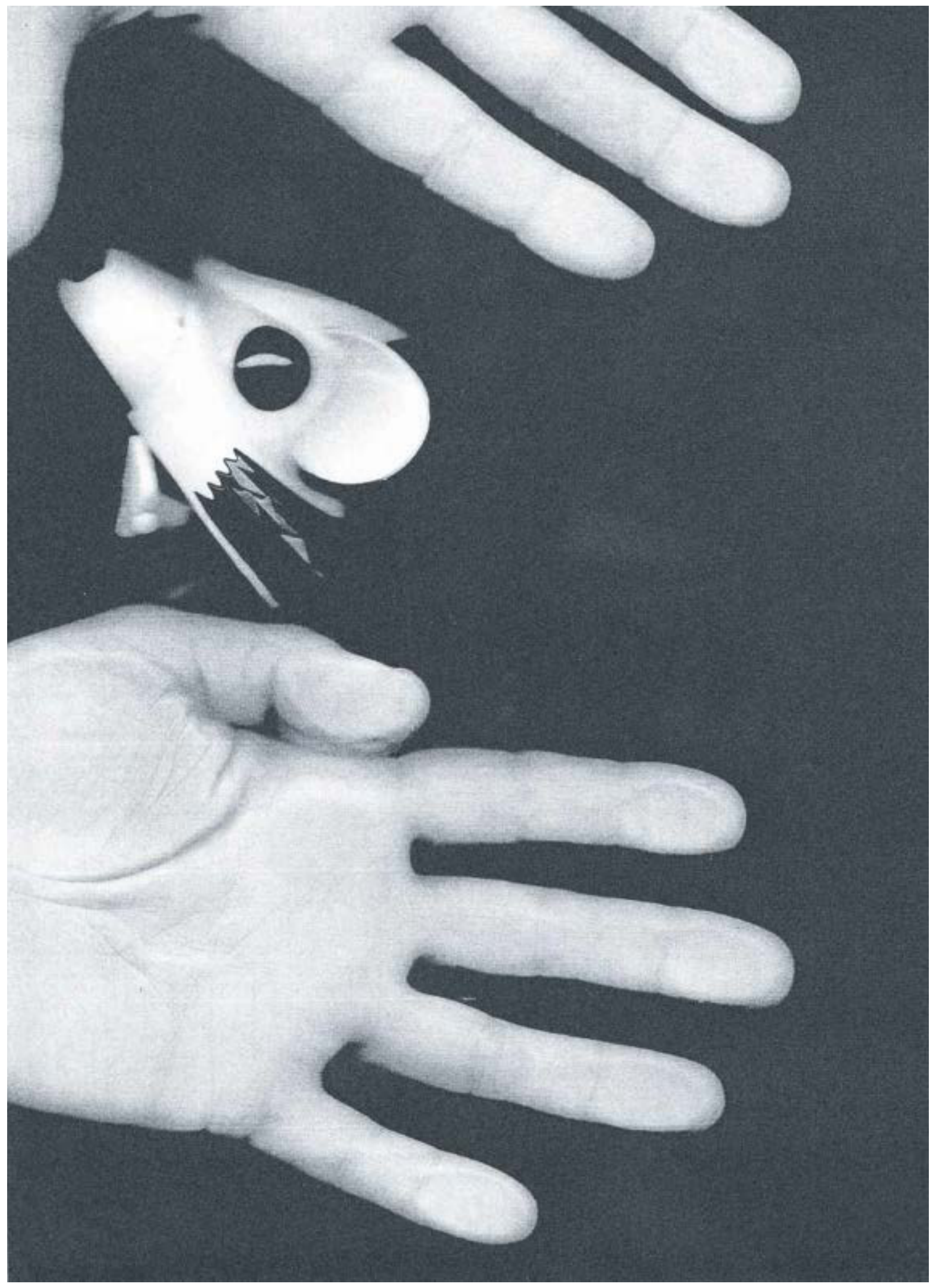
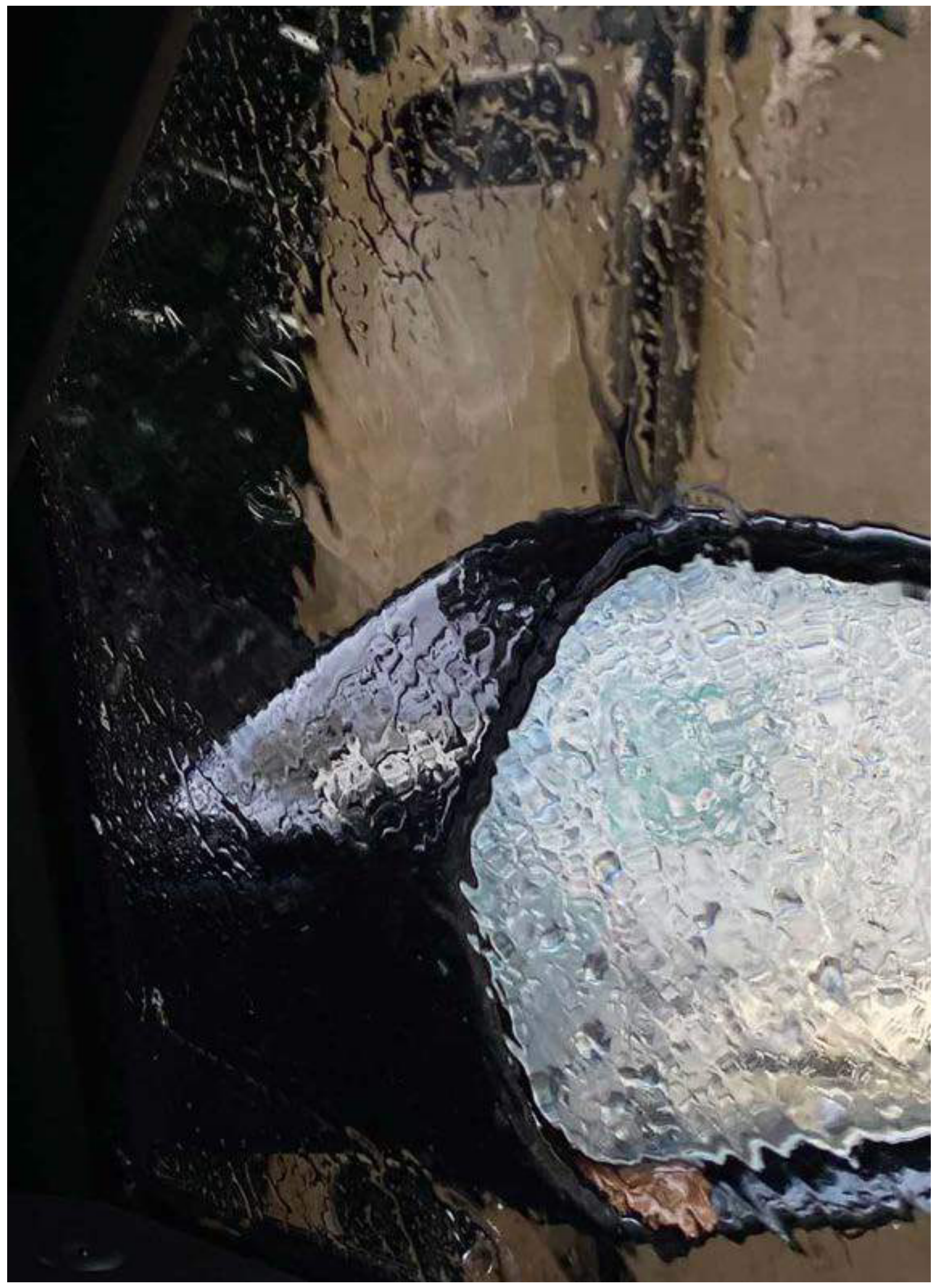
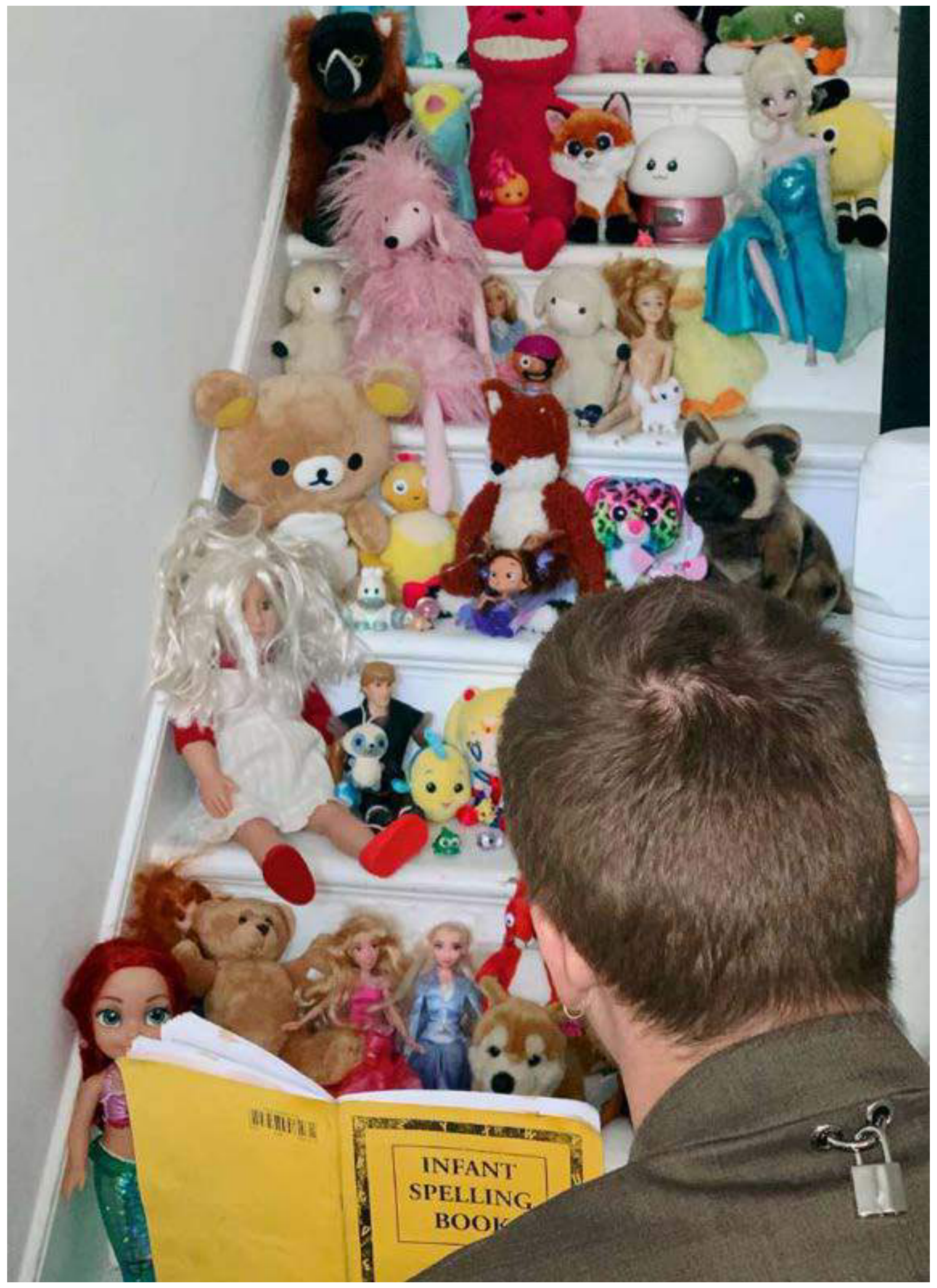
ALL CLOTHES BY CHRISTOPHER KANE



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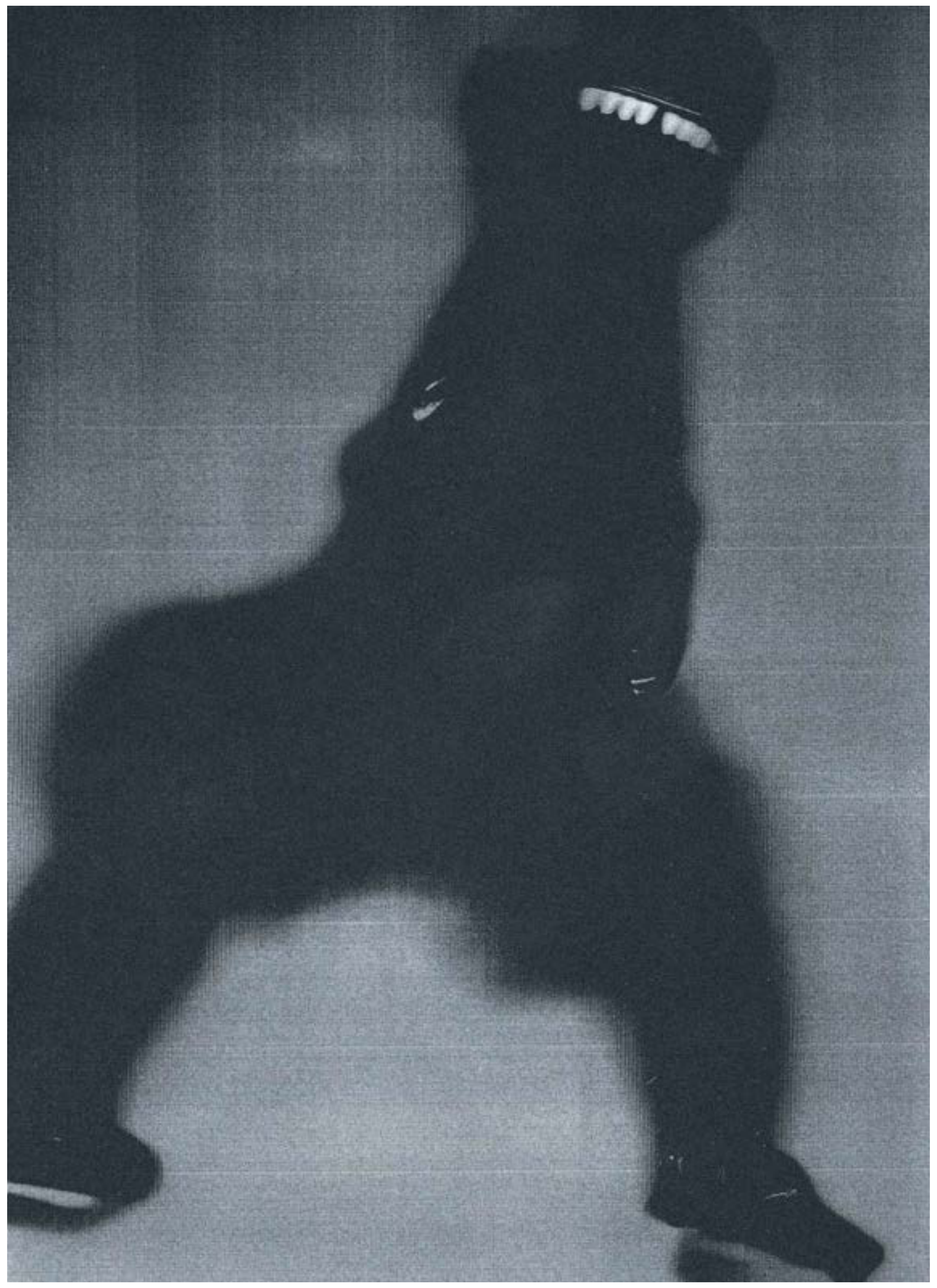

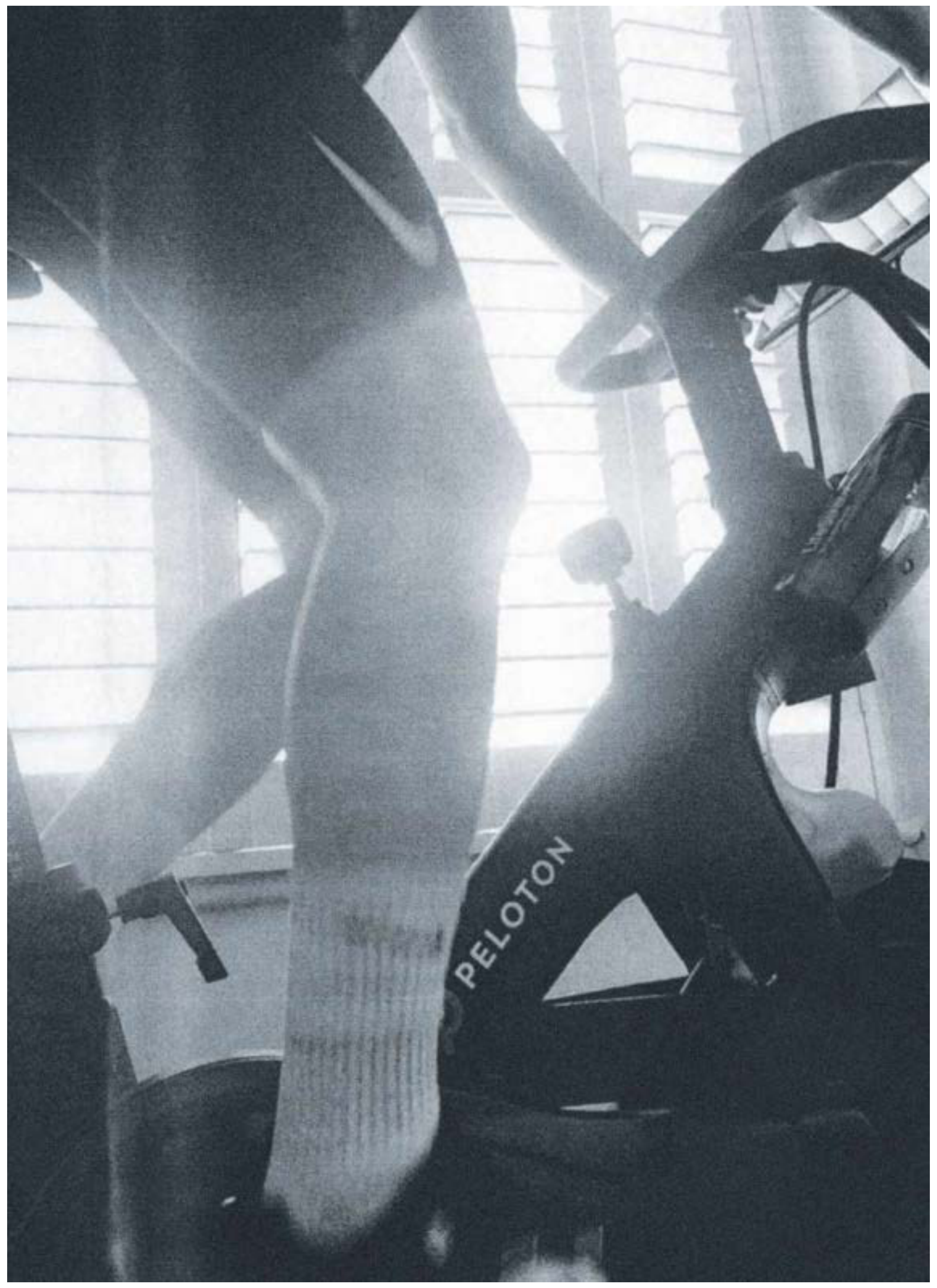
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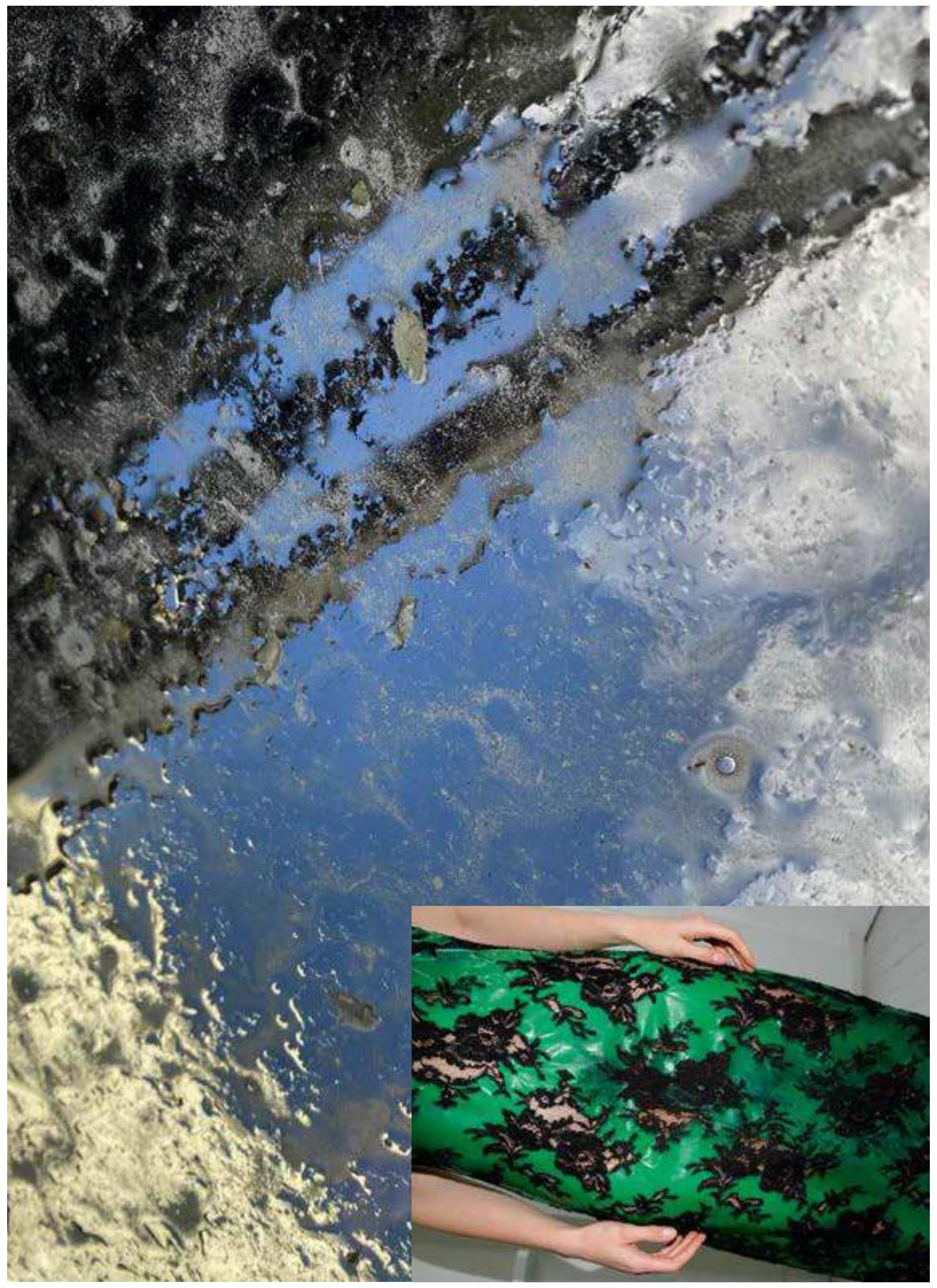

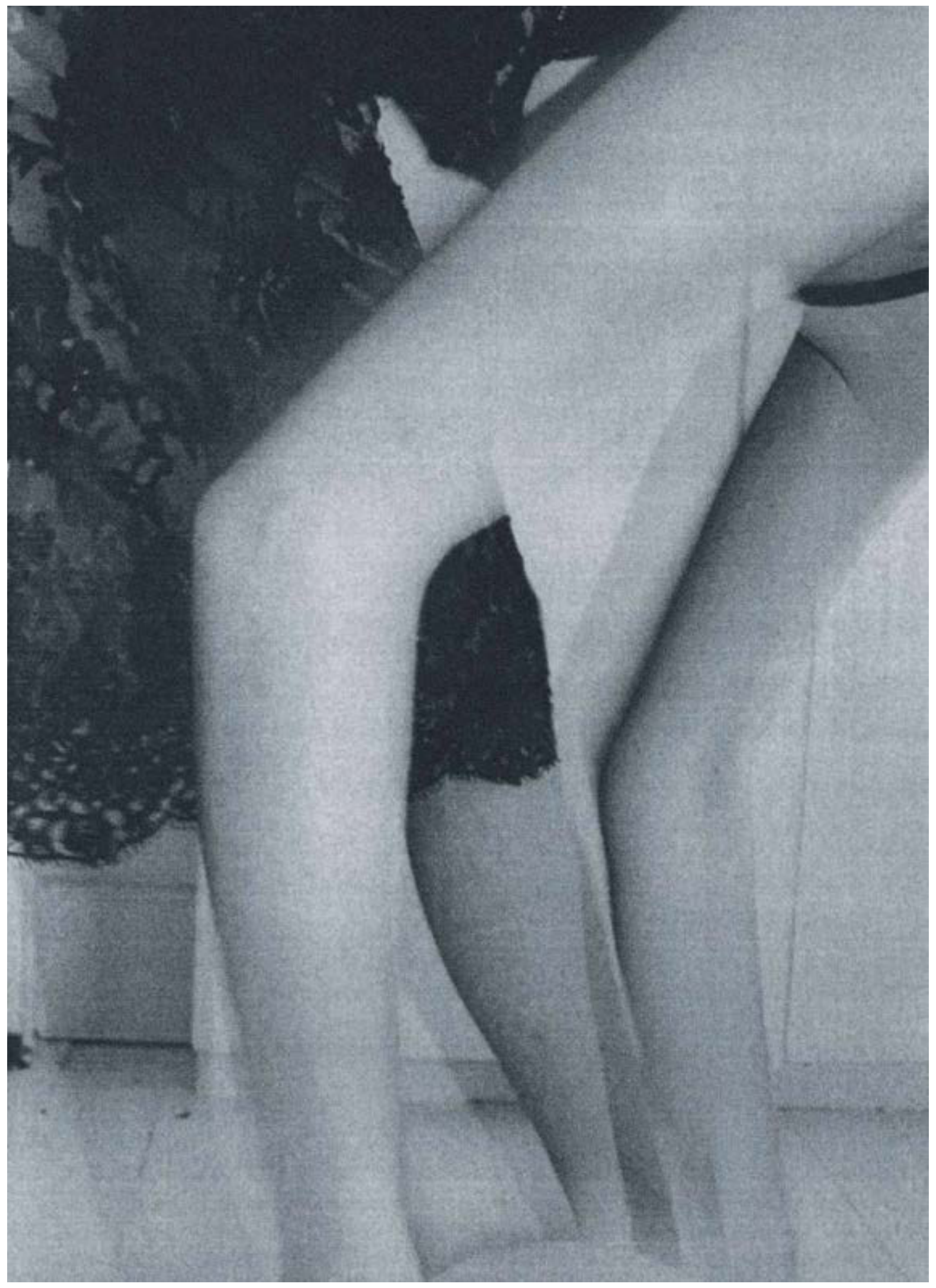

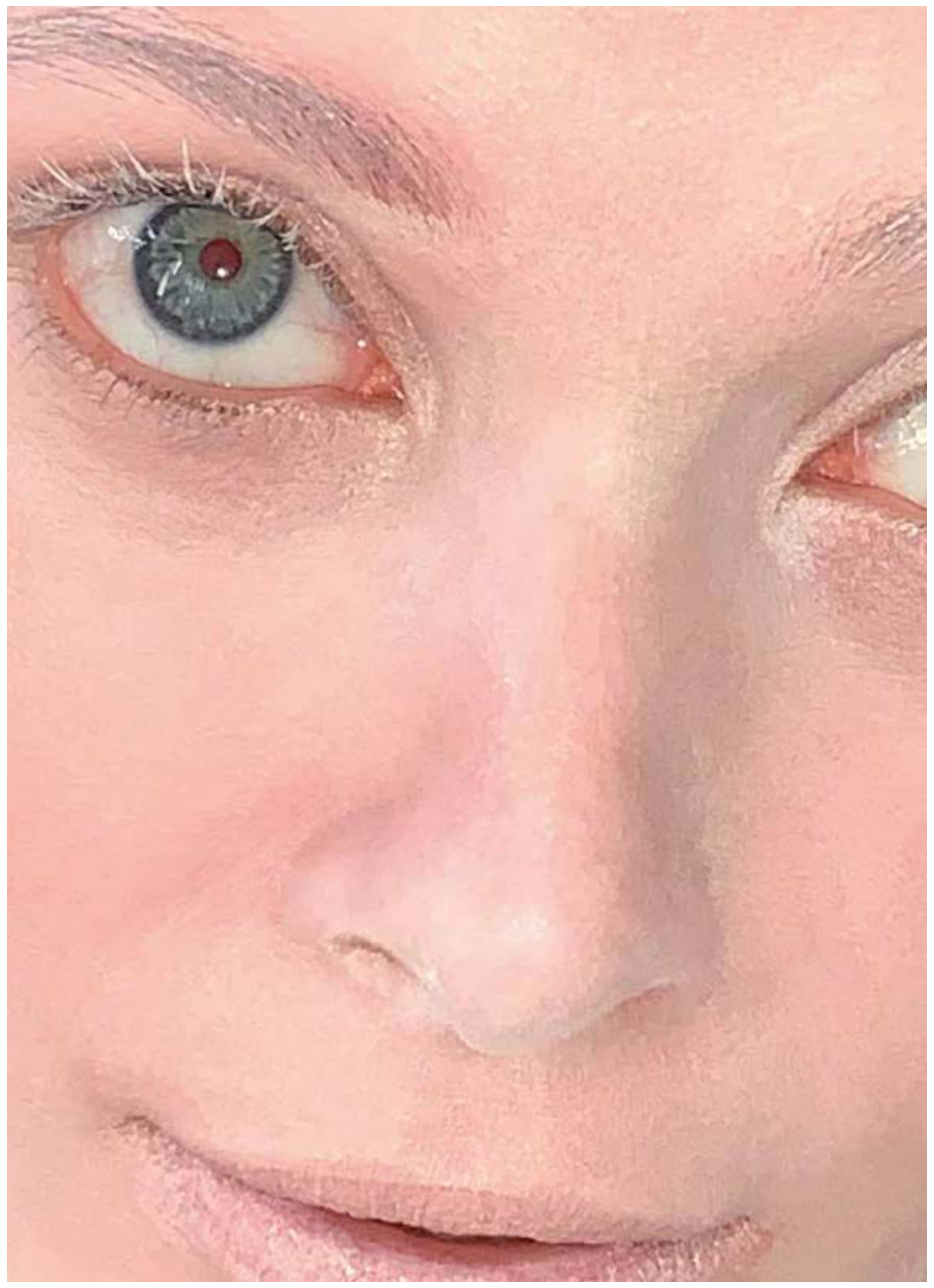

‘As a fashion art director, I generally just ignore the clothes.’

A conversation with
Christopher Simmonds and
Larissa Hofmann,
4 May 2020.

Thomas Lenthal: Thanks for the portfolio; it looks really great. Can you talk me through it?

Christopher Simmonds: When you asked us to do it, I thought about the fact that we were stuck at home, and I remembered the holiday we went on last year to Indonesia. We were on this super-remote island and Christopher Kane happened to be there – which was kind of mad because his studio is at the top of my road in London. You travel halfway round the world to escape everything and then your neighbour is literally in the room next to you. So I thought it was a nice link to do something with him, when one of the last times we saw him was on the other side of the world. That's where it all started.

> **‘I remember counting down the days until I could go and buy *The Face*, and being annoyed because I'd have to wait all day at school to get it.’**

Thomas: So you got in contact with him?

Christopher: I asked if we could have some clothes, he said yes, and then with Larissa, we thought about what we had in the house.

Larissa Hofmann: There's a naive approach to it. The whole thing feels quite playful, but not too much, and it's also quite colourful. So even though we are restricted, there is so much to do if you use the things you have and just think quite naively.

Christopher: It also features our one exciting adventure from the lockdown. One of the only times we left the house was when we went to the car wash, and we had to queue for an hour because it was the only one open. Then we parked the car where it had been parked and it got covered in blossom straight away, so it was a totally redundant exercise.

Thomas: Do you think restriction itself is a useful or even necessary thing when it comes to creative work?

Larissa: I sometimes feel it is quite good to do something within certain restrictions, because you have to work with it and think creatively. If you are able to do that, good things can happen. Sometimes, when you have all the freedom in the world and you can use anything, it is harder.

Christopher: Having to do this project, we did things that we wouldn't normally do, like having me in the pictures, and now we are having this video call, when I am normally behind the scenes. And we did stuff in the house, which we wouldn't normally do, and we used techniques that we wouldn't normally use, like shooting on the phone, or using scanners and photocopiers.

Thomas: I would say that the portfolio looks really considered and attractive. The imagery in general is extremely seductive, even if it is fairly lo-fi, low budget.

Larissa: It's very low budget!

Thomas: But it's good, you know, because to go from huge productions where you can do anything and have nothing, and then create something that looks good from nothing.

Christopher: The other thing was that we had time to work on it. We didn't just do it in one day; we took a few days. That allows you to reflect on things, and we did other things. We did the pictures of Larissa's face right at the end. We had already got everything, and then we thought it would be nice to do some face-paint thing to link through. There is a very loose narrative in there, somehow.

Thomas: What title did you give the portfolio?

Larissa: We thought about ‘Hoppe, hoppe Reiter’, this very basic German children's song about a horse that you sing holding a child on your lap, who then falls off. So it's ‘Hoppe, hoppe Reiter’.

Christopher: We'd like to keep it in German.

Thomas: Since you mentioned it, I know that – with one of your clients, at least – you're accustomed to humongous productions, right? And here it's interesting that within the boundaries of something so intimate and so low budget, you seem to be equally at ease and enjoying yourself just as much, if perhaps in a different way. In your eyes, what constitutes a good fashion portfolio or image, and has it evolved during your career?

Christopher: I always try to have a story behind what we do, whatever it is; the thing I hate to do the most is just the plain shoot in a studio against a studio wall. There's a few of those in my portfolio, but as a fashion art director I generally just ignore the clothes, if that makes sense. The ideas that we come up with are all based around a story about something, no matter how oblique or minimal, and I guess that is what draws me to the people I work with. Sometimes it is interesting to work with people who would just do a studio shoot and push them into doing something else; sometimes it works, and sometimes it doesn't. I also like taking risks, so when I was at *Dazed*, we would always work with people who wouldn't historically work for that publication, or give them shoots to do involving things they've never done before. We did something with an artist and Björk, and he'd never taken a photo before, so his first commission was Björk, which I thought was kind of good. Sometimes the risks don't pay off, but if you don't try, you're never going to learn.

Thomas: For you, a good portfolio, whether it be something you're involved with or something that you are looking at, needs to have some kind of interesting narrative background?

Christopher: Yes, some emotional connection. There are certain photographers who I think photograph people like robots; there is no warmth, humanity or humour in it. I'm not drawn to that kind of thing. But I'm not naming any names!

Thomas: [Laughs] Was there a defining reference, image, moment, or person in your teenage years that looking back you can see as having been instrumental in projecting you towards a career in fashion and art direction?

Christopher: I always wanted to be the art director of *The Face* when I was a kid, and I remember the first issue I bought had Karen Elson on the cover with some weird devil horn McQueen thing.[1] I was on holiday with my parents and I think I read it cover to cover like 20 times on that holiday. It just started from there. Pretty clichéd reference, *The Face*, but it was very good. I was 12 or 13. In Birmingham, where I'm from in the UK, they used to sell it at most newsagents, and I remember counting down the days of the month until I could go and buy it. And I remember going into the newsagents in the morning and it not being on sale, and being annoyed because I'd have to wait all day at school to get it.

Thomas: Another British art director of your generation also cited *The Face*. Perhaps it is specific to your generation in Britain.

Christopher: It's also because it was a cultural magazine and gave us an insight into what was going on outside of our little situation in Birmingham, or wherever that other person was.

> **‘Alessandro [Michele], always knows what he wants, which makes it very easy to move things forward, and the feedback is always very precise as well.’**

Thomas: Can you give me an example of what you find most intuitive in your work, and what you tend to overthink?

Christopher: A lot of the time, I think back to the films I watched in the previous week and there will be a scene in a film that I think would be cool as an idea for a job or something, and I make a mental note of it as something we can try and be inspired by. What I find difficult is when the client doesn't really know what they want, but they want ideas, so we give them countless ideas and then they still don't know what they want. And I'm, like, ‘It's cool that you don't like anything, but is there anything you do like, so that we can gear it more towards what you want?’ And they are, like, ‘No, I don't know.’ That is pretty frustrating.

Thomas: To you, the conversation with the client is kind of essential?

Christopher: I think so. No matter how vague, they are always important. With Alessandro [Michele], he really always knows what he wants, which makes it very easy to move things forward, and the feedback is always very precise as well. But other people, they just don't know. And I'm, like, ‘Give me any insight at all into what you are looking for and we can do it.’ Sometimes even when they give us ideas, we do them and do them again, and it still doesn't go anywhere.

Thomas: That is not a good conversation then.

Christopher: That's what I mean: some people don't want to have the conversations.

Thomas: It's impossible, right? So, did you always strive to be different from a young age and do you still want to be different today? Is it a mindset or a method?

Christopher: I don't really think I am so different! I always try not to do what everyone else is doing. It doesn't matter if someone has done it in the past, because everything's been done anyway. People get so het up, like, ‘Oh my God, this image has been done before’, or whatever, but everything *has* been done before. We're just adding a new take on it, I guess. I just want to do things that interest people, and I hate repeating things that have been done over and over again. I try to change things. I've heard that some people just have a quick conversation before a shoot, but before we do something, everything is all planned out – like, this is what this shot is going to look like; this is the music for the video; this is how it is going to be roughly edited – because I think that clients making a big investment are happy to take a risk on an idea as long as they know what they are going to get at the end of it. You can be risky, as long as you have everything planned.

Thomas: Are you saying it's pure execution?

Christopher: Maybe.

Thomas: Your approach to something editorial would be less planned?

Christopher: When we do *PRINT* magazine, for example, everybody has total freedom.[2] The reason Fran [Burns] and I started that magazine was because with her working at *Vogue* and me at *Dazed*, we were well-trained in running magazines supposed to make money. To do that, they had to adhere to certain rules, which were kind of stifling. We started *PRINT* to give people the freedom that we thought magazines like that should have; magazines like *System*, where you have a lot of freedom. You still need to appease people who are injecting money into these projects, but I think you need some freedom within that.

'A girl I went to school with messaged me, 'Wow, did you work on Gucci Beauty?' It's interesting when people who have no influence on the job react.'

Thomas: I want to ask a question that has to do with Larissa, as well. I know your work, obviously, and I like it very much. You don't strike me as a photographer who necessarily works from a reference or executes something. Your work seems a lot more organic, more free-floating. It feels more intimate somehow.

Larissa: Maybe one thing is that Chris's responsibilities are much bigger and he has much more freedom when it comes to budget, whereas I've just started out, so I have to be quite creative and know what I can do with my own little things in my own little world. What he said about the image being emotional, that is important to me, too. Even if it is a still life or with colour, it has to say something in a certain way. I do have references; maybe I just hide them well. That is what we argue about sometimes: you say it doesn't matter if it has already been done, but I don't want to copy another image like that.

Christopher: It's not about copying!

Larissa: I would rather have 100 influences, collect a million things and pick out the things that I like and really make my own thing out of them. Maybe it is different for a photographer than it is for an art director. If I start out like this, it turns into something completely different at the end, even if I have references. I hate delivering pictures that don't feel original.

Thomas: Chris, in an ideal scenario, do you prefer your work to appeal to a niche demographic or are you aiming to appeal to a wider audience?

Christopher: I would rather inspire the people who don't give a shit about us. When we did the Gucci Beauty launch last year, I got a message from a girl I went to school with, who I hadn't talked to for 20 years, and she was, like, 'Oh wow, did you work on this thing?' It's really interesting when people who have no influence on the job have a reaction; people we don't need to appease. When people outside that circle feel something, then that is a job well done.

Thomas: That's good. Which fashion-industry figure – living or dead – do you most admire and why?

Christopher: Jefferson [Hack] is a really great person. He is so supportive of everyone who worked at *Dazed* and *AnOther*, past or present, and he always just wants people to do their best. They could have changed *Dazed* a million times, but he has stuck to his guns about what he wanted for the company. And look at the people who have worked there over the years; it's been pretty prosperous how many people's careers were launched there. There's also David Sims. His total commitment to image-making is something to behold; he's always striving to push or improve or challenge. He never settles. Many years ago he told me he always gets restless in shoots, struggling to shoot the same kind of image multiple times. I sympathize with that feeling – it's informed a lot of my work.

Thomas: What does success look like for you?

Christopher: Like I said before, it is always nice to hear people who aren't involved in a project react. Also, I always want to keep the next generation inspired. Another reason we started *PRINT* was for that: every issue we lose so much money because it costs so much, but I want it to be a price that kids or students can buy. We failed miserably with the last one and no one bought it, but all the previous ones we priced nice and cheap for what they were. And the people who got it seemed to really enjoy it. It is always nice to hear messages on Instagram with kids who are like, 'This is amazing, thank you for doing this.'

Thomas: Describe a professional disappointment and what it taught you.

Christopher: Sometimes you think, 'I really want to work with this client', and then you do it and although you work with someone amazing, it just isn't what you had in your head. You end up wishing you hadn't gone through the whole process.

Larissa: And what did you learn?

Christopher: Every time there is a new job or a new client, I go into it with a positive outlook. Sometimes it doesn't last! So that's what I've learned: to try every time.

Thomas: When we put together the roster of the creative directors we wanted to talk to, it was really difficult to find a female creative director; there are very few around. Why do think that is?

Christopher: I don't know. There are far fewer in the studio with me, as well. And with one of the women there, I've said, 'Look, we need to find more women.' But why that is, I don't know.

'In six months' time, everyone's going to be fed up with looking at people in their own homes and will want to have some kind of escape from everything.'

Larissa: Maybe because it is still a male-ruled industry; I don't know.

Thomas: Among the more promising up-and-coming young fashion photographers, there are now far more female than male photographers. But hardly any women in the creative direction. I don't know, maybe there's something…

Christopher: There are a few. I mean, there's Ronnie [Cooke Newhouse]. And Veronica [Ditting] at *The Gentlewoman*.

Larissa: Veronica is amazing. It was really good to work with her, a female art director; the conversation was so different. Her seeing and thinking and approach, but I think that is also her character.

Thomas: Plus, she is German, like you! What do you now know about the fashion industry that you didn't when you were first entering it?

Christopher: Everything's probably going to change in the next six months, but even then the most important thing will be my team. I've learned that fashion is intrinsically about people and I couldn't do this without everyone in the studio and by my side on set.

Thomas: Right. As things gradually return to some level of normality, will your impulse be to explore notions of fantasy and escapism, or do you think you'll double-down on realism?

Christopher: We are actually working on an idea that is just a fantasy thing, so whether or not the client approves it, that is what I am leaning towards; like, more out there and weird. In six months' time, people are going to be pretty fed up with looking at people in their own homes and will want to have some kind of escape from everything.

Thomas: Are you itching to get back to the processes of pre-Covid-19?

Christopher: Everything was so hectic before; I think it will be interesting to see how it calms down. I don't know, it might go back to being even worse, but the travel and the excess might be put on pause for a bit. It felt like you could do anything for anyone and people would by and large try to make it happen. But there will be more reserve now. I'm not sure how it will work, trying to do fantastical ideas in a more reserved, low-key way!

Thomas: There will be less extravagance, maybe a measure of sanity.

Christopher: Which is not a bad thing.

Thomas: Perhaps, probably. Do you guys work together all the time?

Christopher: Well, we've done a few jobs together. Larry did a shoot in the last issue of *PRINT*, which was a playing-cards thing and was pretty cute. Then we did this thing for you and we did a picture for *Vogue* just beforehand.

Larissa We do things together only on commercial jobs, so the thing we did for you just now was quite nice. It was nice to work freely together without having a client telling us what to shoot. Shoot the shoes!

Christopher: Shoot the watch!

Thomas: Where's your office? It looks great.

Christopher: It's in Shoreditch, on the canal. Everybody is working from home, so there are no computers. It looks nice without the computers, but it would look even nicer with the people. They'll be back one day.

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1. The cover of the August 1997 issue of *The Face* featured a photograph by Luis Sanchis of Karen Elson making devil's horns with her fingers; the headline was 'Horny Devil'.

2.Founded by Christopher Simmonds and Francesca Burns in 2016, *PRINT* magazine is a limited-edition annual publication that explores different forms of print. Past contributors have included Jamie Hawkesworth, Zoë Ghertner, Joe McKenna and Suzanne Koller, Max Pearmain, whose work has appeared on formats such as playing cards, wallpaper, and paper plates.

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WHEN YOU CAN'T BOOK A STUDIO,
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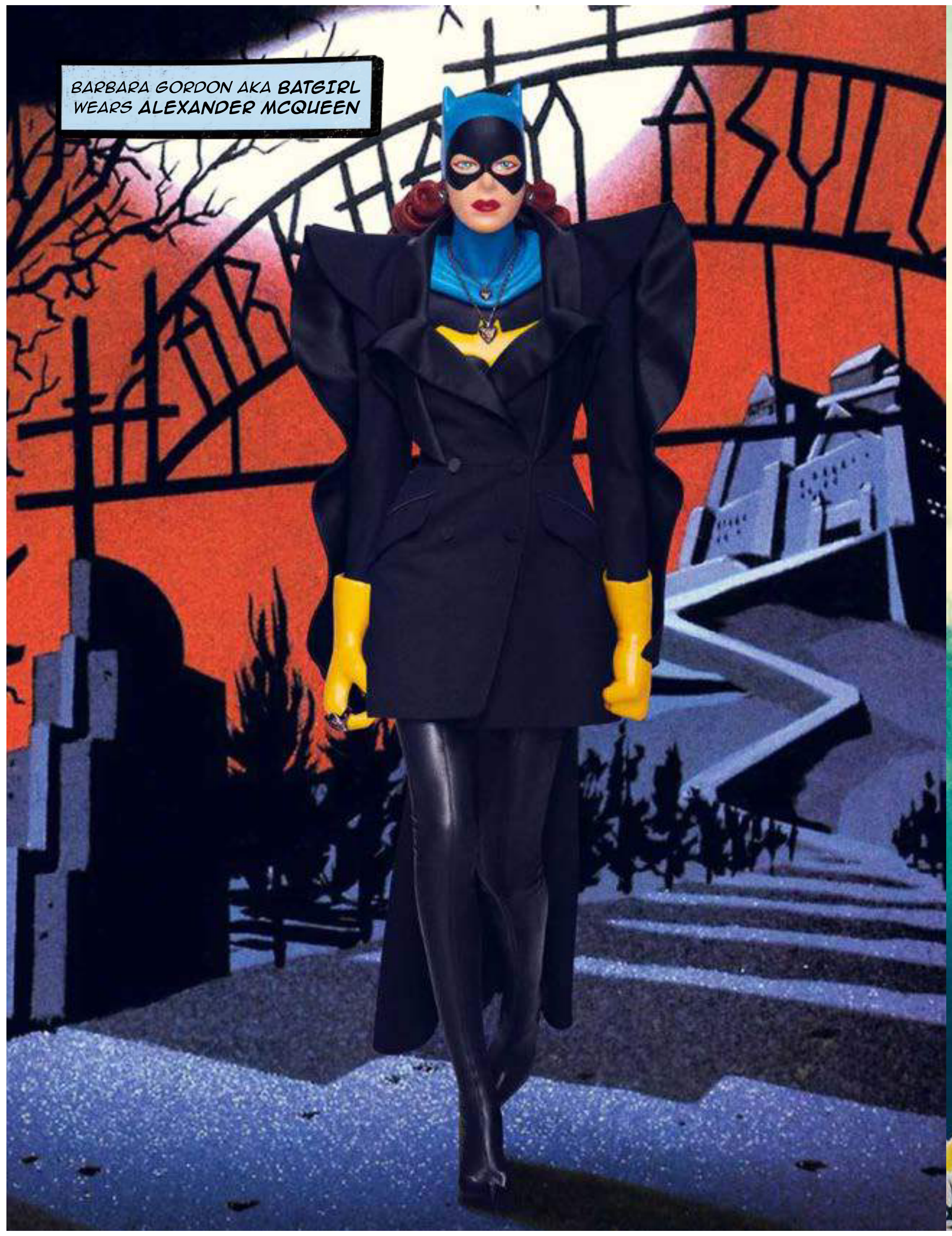
THE FASHION HEROES

CREATIVE DIRECTOR **LEE SWILLINGHAM**
PHOTOGRAPHER **SØLVE SUNDSBØ**
FASHION EDITOR **GRO CURTIS**

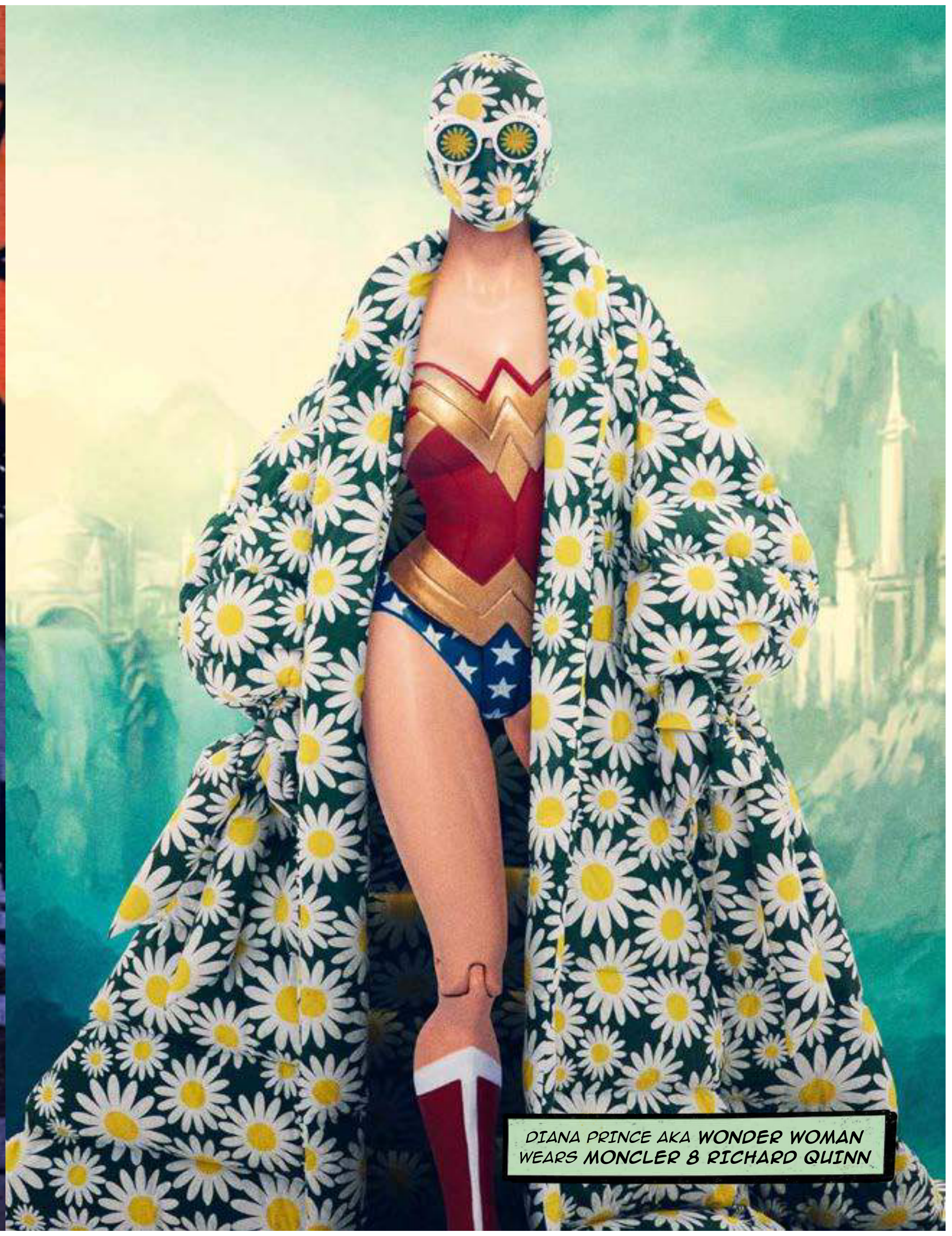
FEATURING ACTION FIGURES FROM LEE SWILLINGHAM'S
COLLECTION WEARING **FALL/WINTER 2020**

DESIGN KATE BULL AT SUBURBIA / PHOTO ASSISTANT SAMUEL STEPHENSON / RETOUCHING DIGITAL LIGHT LTD

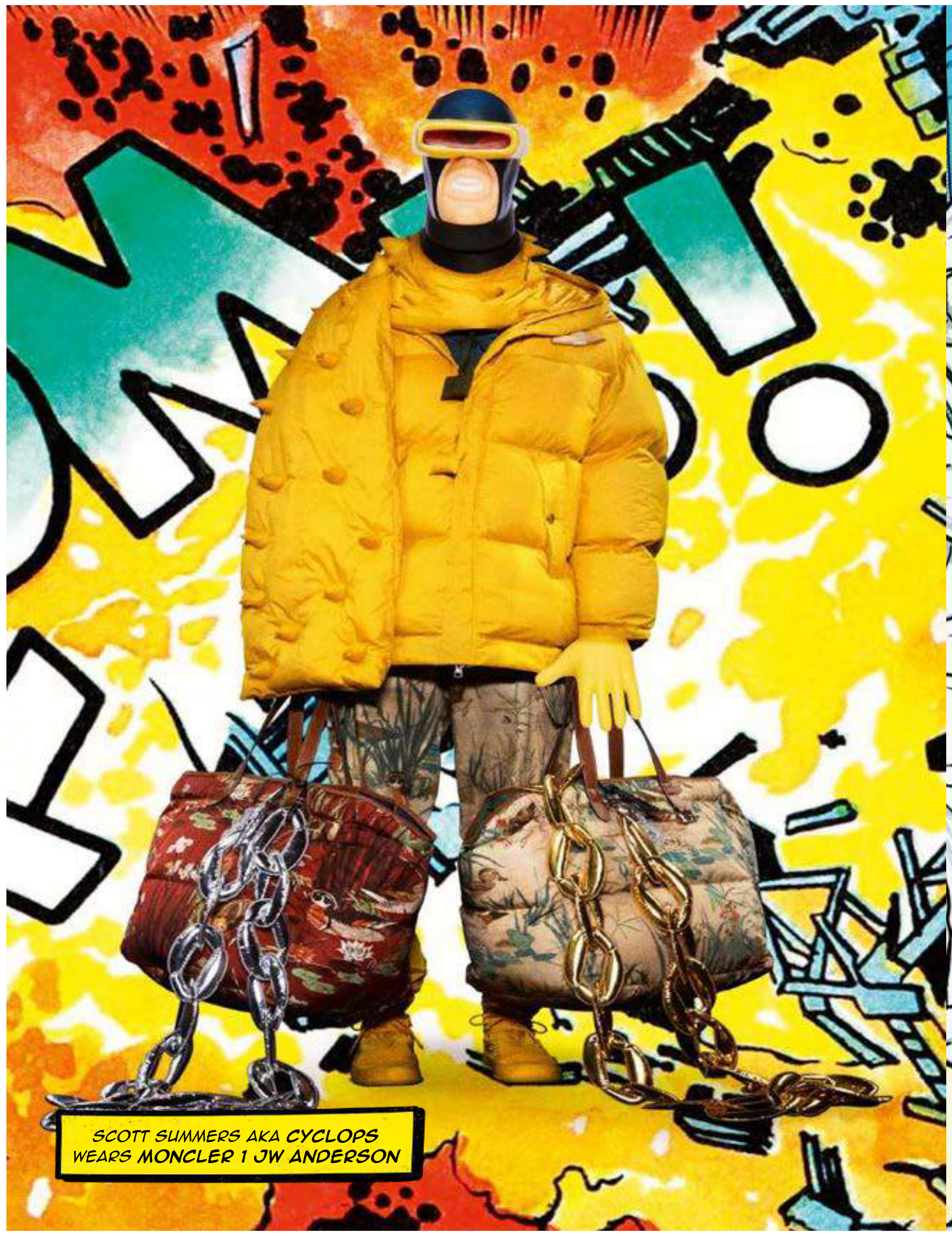
BRUCE WAYNE AKA **BATMAN**
WEARS **RICK OWENS**



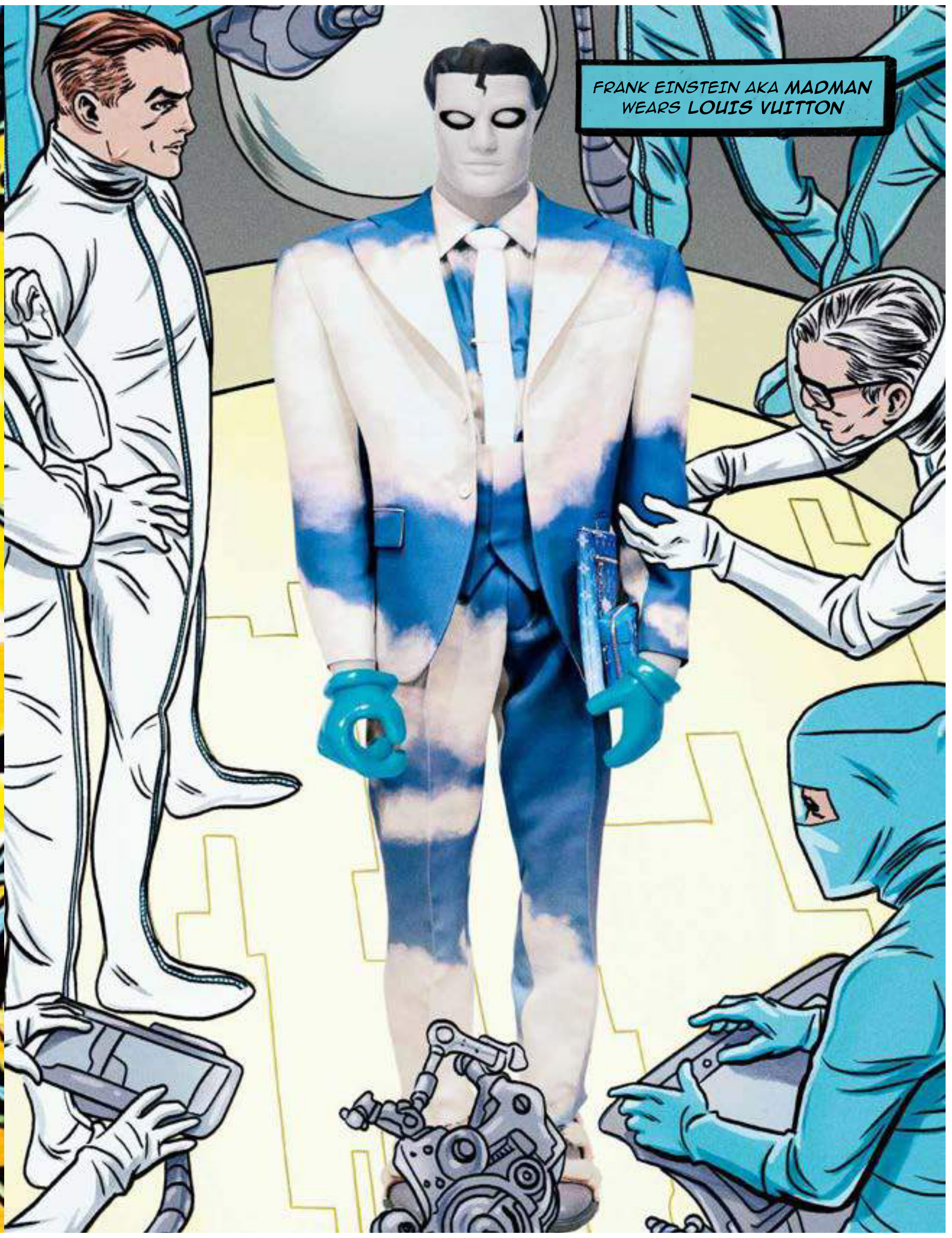
BARBARA GORDON AKA **BATGIRL**
WEARS **ALEXANDER MCQUEEN**



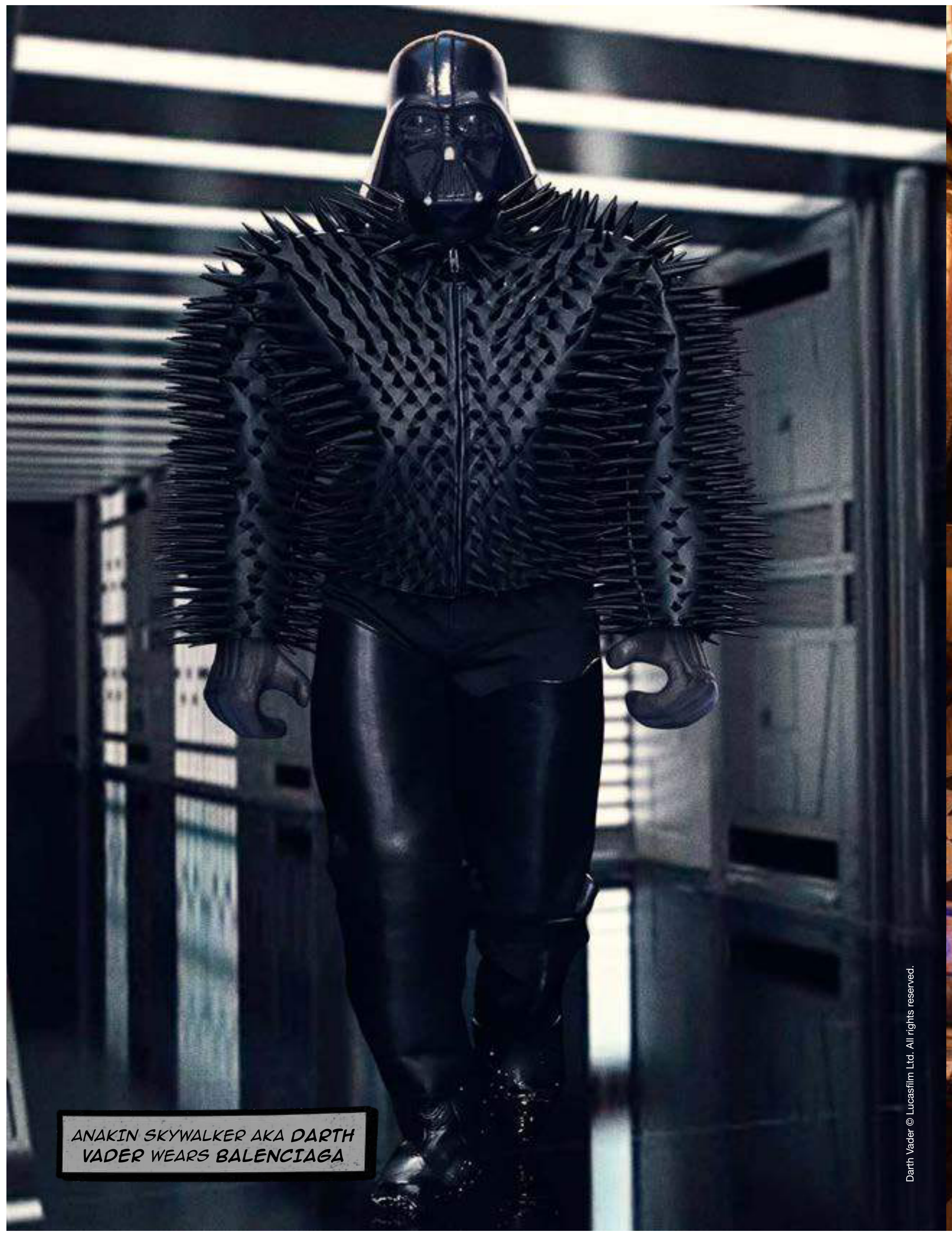
DIANA PRINCE AKA **WONDER WOMAN**
WEARS **MONCLER 8 RICHARD QUINN**



SCOTT SUMMERS AKA **CYCLOPS**
WEARS **MONCLER 1 JW ANDERSON**

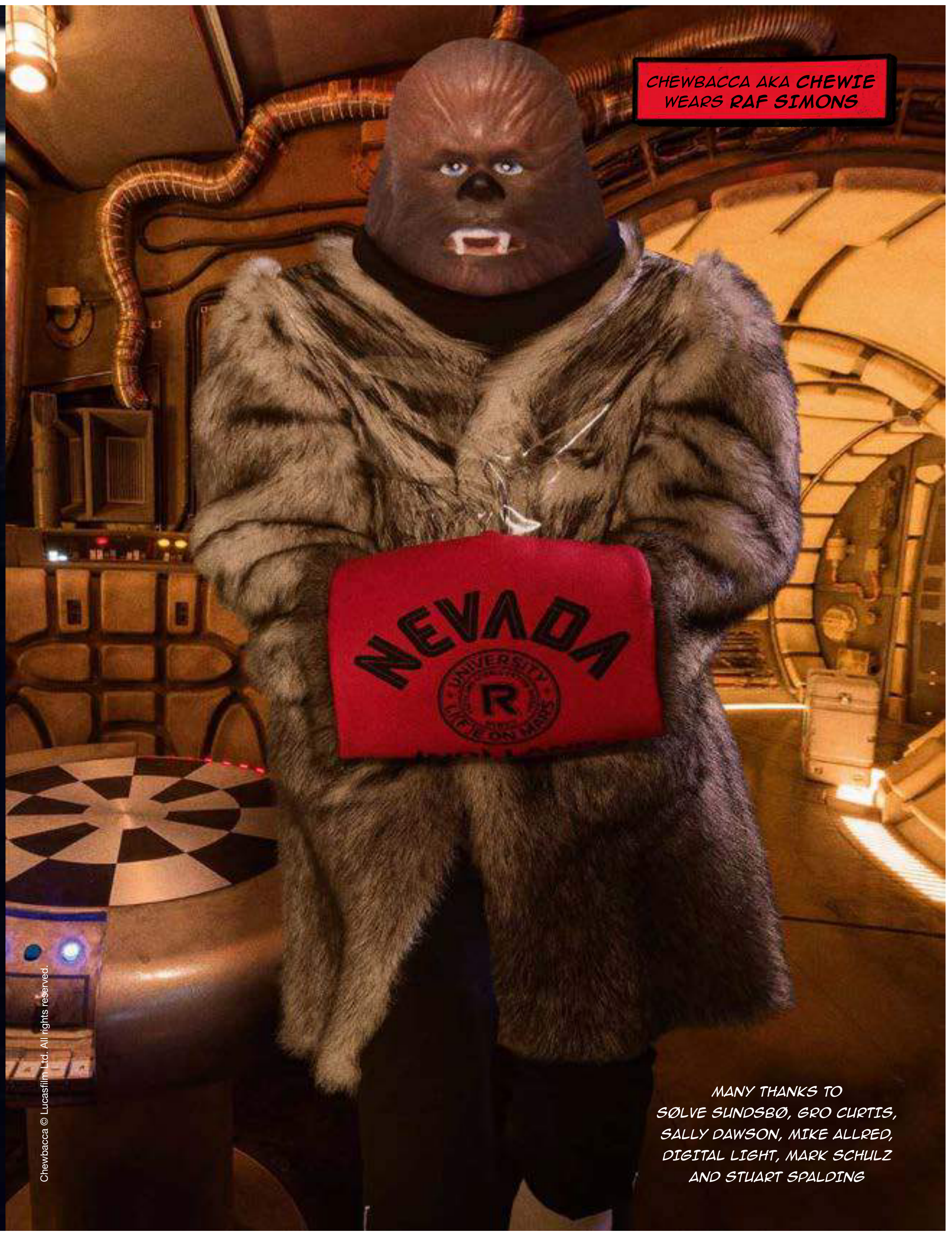


FRANK EINSTEIN AKA **MADMAN**
WEARS **LOUIS VUITTON**



ANAKIN SKYWALKER AKA **DARTH VADER** WEARS **BALENCIAGA**

Darth Vader © Lucasfilm Ltd. All rights reserved.



CHEWBACCA AKA **CHEWIE** WEARS **RAF SIMONS**

Chewbacca © Lucasfilm Ltd. All rights reserved.

MANY THANKS TO
SØLVE SUNDSBØ, GRO CURTIS,
SALLY DAWSON, MIKE ALLRED,
DIGITAL LIGHT, MARK SCHULZ
AND STUART SPALDING

‘I’m already onto the next thing before I’ve finished what I’m doing right now.’

A conversation with
Lee Swillingham, 6 May 2020.

Thomas Lenthal: The portfolio is immensely good fun, and I should thank Sølve [Sundsbø] for participating. He’s really a whizz. Can you give me a bit of background on how you put it together?

Lee: I’ve been stuck in my little office at home, which is where I am now, since just before the British lockdown started, a good seven weeks ago. So when you came to me with this project, it seemed like a good challenge. I always enjoy coming up with amusing solutions, probably because I’ve been doing this for a while, like you, and there isn’t always much opportunity for humour in what we do. Although, in recent years, I guess it’s become more typical for there to be some humour in fashion, which is one of the more interesting innovations. When you look at what Demna [Gvasalia] does, for example, there’s always some kind of humour there. Anyway, I’ve been collecting American comic books since I was about 12, and I really love French comic books, so I just had this idea: what if I use these guys as the models? I thought that was funny, and I called Sølve straight away and he thought it was a great idea. Then we got to work in this entirely legal lockdown way, where no one came near anyone else. I left all the action figures in a box at the end of my street – a very chic box, actually – and Sølve picked it up and we went about doing the shoot. It actually took quite a long time. This is the first time I’ve worked in such a long-distance kind of way, even if Sølve is only a mile or so away. It was a very interesting process and procedure, even just from a purely organizational perspective. The figures include one really tiny old *Star Wars* action figure; the detail that Sølve got out of that little face is incredible. And that’s Cyclops from the *X-Men*. Gro [Curtis] picked out the fashion and did a great job finding good clothes for Darth Vader to wear, and I love Rick Owens on Batman. He looks pretty good. It was just a really fun job. I mean, what was interesting was watching Sølve and the retouching, how they really adapted the clothes from the press photography and managed to change the shape to fit the bodies of the characters. Batman is a very bulky guy, so they changed the Rick Owens silhouette and put it on his body so it looks a lot more muscular than it would on the catwalk. Everyone really got into it. It’s fair to say that people have a lot more time on their hands at the moment; photographers certainly do because there are no shoots. I’m guessing that your project has probably kept a lot of people busy, which is good; they’re probably quite grateful.

Thomas: People jumped on the opportunity!

‘I’d struggle to find much of interest in fashion images that were just simple studio shoots recording a look. I almost couldn’t see the point of them.’

Lee: It was fun. It took quite a long time, probably longer than I thought it would, but that’s because Sølve wanted to do a really amazing job retouching and finalizing the images. And, as I said, some of these figures were tiny, like Chewbacca. Some of them were really big, like the really beautiful Batman that I bought in New York 10 years ago. The way they shot it was fantastic, and I’m really pleased that it’s really fun.

Thomas: It looks good. What about the backgrounds? Did you take care of that yourself? Or was that Sølve?

Lee: The backgrounds were basically sourced online and only slightly manipulated and changed. With the Madman character, the guy wearing the white suit, I actually know the creator, so he drew that background and sent it to me.[1] That’s a slightly less-known character, but still a really great American comic-book character.

Thomas: Your portfolio is very you. It reminds me of the approach, attitude and take on the industry that *The Face* had back when you art directed it. I wasn’t aware of it, but a whole generation of younger English art directors reference *The Face* as some kind of teenage epiphany, something that drew them into this profession. I wasn’t expecting that. It was a major influence on a whole generation of British art directors, specifically that notion of giving fashion a narrative. That’s not something we necessarily do on the continent.

Lee: You just made me think of something that hadn’t occurred to me before. You were doing magazines around the same time that I was doing *The Face*, and if you remember, back then you weren’t given an infinite amount of pages for things you were working on. A story would be 6, 8, 12 pages if you were lucky, 14 hardly ever. Since then, I’ve worked on projects where the number of pages for a story seems to be infinite, to the point that it’s really not an edited story, but instead a portfolio of what happened to be shot that day. I think that’s a very different mindset. Clearly, the restriction of having a certain number of pages focuses not only the stylist and photographer and the people on the magazine, but everyone trying to tell that message, whatever it is.

Thomas: It’s true that page inflation within portfolios has become mind-boggling. Some are 100 pages long! That’s a fairly recent development. I wonder whether it’s not a way for some photographers to stake out their territory?

Lee: There’s a lot going on and that could be part of it. Also, since digital became the default way that people make their work, you can produce more content. That applies to everything, not just fashion photography. We both worked with [Jean-Baptiste] Mondino, didn’t we? He’s incredible, and if you think about the amount of thought and effort and energy that went into everything he did. That was 6 or 8 pages; that was not 32 pages, 40 pages, you know?

Thomas: It’s as if paper is trying to mimic the digital world. We’ve been slowly driven into this inflation, and like greedy children, we went for it. I remember a great photographer who said back in the 1990s: ‘Photographers should probably only take about five pictures a year.’ And now he’s producing, like, 1,500. Is restriction itself useful to creative work?

Lee: I thought about that very point when I was working on this. I think it is, absolutely: it confines a creative space, and it gives parameters. Don’t you?

Thomas: Absolutely. I couldn’t even imagine where to start if I didn’t have some kind of ironclad context. That’s immensely helpful, because you’re essentially trying to find a solution, but you’re still trying to infuse some kind of grace into the whole thing. Next question: what do you think constitutes a good fashion image? Has this definition changed during your career? I realize that that’s a huge question!

Lee: I always like fashion images that encapsulate something more than just being a record of the clothes. In the early days of my career, I always struggled to find much of interest in fashion images that were just simple studio shoots celebrating or recording a particular look. I almost couldn’t see the point of them. Obviously, you learn more about the industry and realize why they are always needed to some extent. But I think good fashion photography reflects the culture of the times, the zeitgeist, the politics.

Thomas: It’s funny, because certain creative directors are like, ‘a great fashion image is timeless’, which strikes me as a strange proposition.

‘Good fashion photography is like a strand of pop culture, and I think all good pop culture has a disposable aspect to it.’

Lee: I would completely disagree with that. For me, they’re like a strand of pop culture, and I think good pop culture has a disposable aspect to it. I don’t think we should be trying to create something that focuses on whether it is going to be in a museum in 30 years. I don’t see how you can do that and make an interesting and relevant image. I’ve never been that interested in the idea of fashion photography in a reverent museum space. I love art, and I love art photography, but I see them as slightly separate things. There have been amazing retrospectives of various fashion photographers, and I’m not saying they don’t belong in a museum space; I’m just speaking about my personal interest.

Thomas: You’re more interested in the vernacular for fashion photography?

Lee: I think so. Thinking about *The Face*, which I haven’t for a while, it wasn’t technically meant to be a fashion magazine. It was a culture magazine that had fashion imagery in it. I just saw fashion as one of the strands of pop culture, along with the music, the art and other culture elements. That’s probably why you see a link between what I’ve done in this portfolio and what I did back then; I think that’s completely legitimate. When Lara Croft and *Tomb Raider* was a big cultural thing in the 1990s, we did the same thing; we took Lara and got the gaming company to dress her. You know, it’s funny: looking back at some of those labels: it was Helmut Lang, which doesn’t really exist anymore; Jean Colonna, which I think is gone;[2] McQueen was in there and did a great thing.

Thomas: Were you at *The Face* when Stéphane Sednaoui’s fashion superheroes series came out?[3]

Lee: No, but I’ve stolen the title. That was before my time. I was in high school when it came out and it blew my mind when I saw it at the newsagents. I thought it was the most incredible thing ever. It made me want to go and live in Paris. The fashion innovators in Paris in the 1980s, especially Jean Paul Gaultier, took fashion and slammed it into pop culture. It just blew my mind.

Thomas: You mentioned Jean-Baptiste and I mentioned Stéphane. They are two image-makers who were heavily involved in music, which gave them an interesting bridge into a career in the UK, and at *The Face*. The most interesting work came out in British magazines.

Lee: The most fun I had at *The Face* was Mondino calling me out of the blue with some crazy idea. I mean, he did that gangster fashion shoot in LA in the super high-key colour, with young people on cars brandishing chrome weapons, wearing Hawaiian shirts. Baz Luhrmann and his wife told me to my face that the whole art direction for *Romeo+Juliet* came directly from that shoot.[4]

Thomas: Was there a defining image, reference, person, moment from your teenage years that was instrumental in you moving towards a career in fashion or in a particular creative direction? Two other British creative directors told me it was *The Face*. Not to say that it was *The Face* for you…

Lee: It was *The Face*, when Neville Brody was art director, and there were those incredible covers, like the cover that was just yellow, with the big, bold word 'ELECTRO' on it.[5] Sure, it was *The Face*. I probably wasn't so much aware of the photographers, but I was probably aware of the styling, what Ray Petri was doing, and the graphics.[6] Apart from that, I was looking at old *Nova* magazines that my mum had, because she was a graphic designer. *Nova* was designed by David Hillman,[7] who was a great editorial designer. That magazine looked incredible. Helmut Newton shot for *Nova*, so I became aware of his images very early on. I loved his early work because I loved movies, and he would shoot stories, like this amazing James Bond-style shoot with a cool guy in a suit and a girl by the door. It was before his famous style developed, I guess.

Thomas: There was a big trend for that in fashion magazines. Even in French *Vogue* you'd have funny stories. Even Guy Bourdin would do some of those, and they would ask Helmut for stories. Oddly enough, I have issues of French *Vogue* from the mid-1960s and you find Superman in there. The vernacular was very important to creative directors back then.

Lee: I discovered French *Vogue* when I was at Saint Martins in the late 1980s, early 1990s, and that blew my mind. When you discover those things.

Thomas: From the 1970s? You're talking about the Guy Bourdin stuff?

Lee: All that stuff. Guy Bourdin, all that amazing stuff. And it was just on another level, really. Just incredible, incredible stuff. Also, I loved Chris von Wangenheim for the slightly more Studio 54 vibe; his pictures were incredible. It was funny discovering that stuff in England in the late 1980s, because there was quite a strong politically correct movement among young people. I would buy these second-hand Helmut Newton books from the early 1980s and have them in my desk at Saint Martins and I'd get remarks like, 'Why have you got this disgusting pornography?' So then I just kept them at home, because I was embarrassed. Obviously, that whole aesthetic then went on to be one of the biggest influences on the whole fashion industry for the next 20 years.

Thomas: Thanks to Tom Ford.

Lee: Yes, exactly.

Thomas: Can you give me an example of what is most intuitive in your work and what you tend to overthink?

Lee: The answer is one and the same. I have always enjoyed doing the layout of a fashion story from early on in my career, because you're creating narrative, contrast and juxtaposition. I think art directors are much better at doing this stuff than photographers.

Thomas: There are some photographers who aren't that bad at it, but you're right.

Lee: On the whole, a good layout is invariably probably done by an art director. I do those quite quickly and intuitively, and I enjoy doing them, and I'm quite pleased with the results. But in this digital age, when things sit in the ether, on the server, and other people on the magazine see them, and people start doing the credits, it goes round this process and it lives for too long, and then you see it again and you're, like, 'Should I make a change?' Or someone else suggests a change, or you'll try a different version. You can end up with so many different ones, and you always go back to the original. It's a bit like things never seeming to end nowadays. They get tweaked and adjusted to the very last moment, and if it's a digital project, then even when they get uploaded, they get tweaked again. Kanye West released an album a couple of years ago, the album got put on Spotify and iTunes, and then a week later, he changed it and put up a new version. That's what life is now.

> **'I would have old Helmut Newton books in my desk at Saint Martins and I'd get remarks like, 'Why have you got all this disgusting pornography?''**

Thomas: That makes sense: the liquid creative object. Did you always strive to be different and individual from a young age? Was that a preoccupation of yours?

Lee: When I was young, yes. I grew up in Manchester and being interested in music and clubs and fashion. There's a lot of individual expression in that. I went to a boy's school where you had to wear a uniform and a tie, so when you went out, you wanted to express yourself and feel different. I always wanted to be involved in graphic design and magazines or film and music. Today, in the work I do with Stuart [Spalding] at Suburbia, we like things to change all the time. We like new stuff and we don't really look back. We're always trying to make something look different. We like pop culture; we like music; we like pop art; comic books are a big influence. One of the best inventions for me is Spotify; it's unbelievable, because I love music and I love the recommendations. I've discovered so much amazing stuff based on what the algorithm tells me. And most of my friends and people I know go back to their comfort records and music when they're listening. They're listening to The Verve or something from when they were a kid in the 1980s, or Fleetwood Mac or Tears for Fears, while I'm listening to the new Weeknd album. I love new music; I love grime. That's why I think *The Face* was the perfect magazine for me. I mean, I'm already onto the next thing before I've finished what I'm doing right now. That's just the way my mind works.

Thomas: Do you prefer your work to appeal to a more niche and in-the-know demographic, or a wider audience?

Lee: When I was doing *The Face*, some issues, the publisher would come in and announce to everyone, 'Amazing news, guys! Last issue we sold 250,000 copies, globally!' And everyone would be really happy. But nowadays on Instagram, people have half a million, a million, 2 million. I mean, the whole audience thing has changed so much that I don't even know how to answer that question. When we were working on *Love* with Katie [Grand], we knew that a cross-section of people who looked at that magazine were fashion students, fashion industry people, and public consumers specialized in their interests. So we were geared towards them, but there's also a pleasure and enjoyment in taking to a more mass market some of your expertise, your influences and the things you enjoy in your more niche work. I feel a real sense of achievement when I get something over the line, as they say, and manage to do something that looks more interesting than what a client normally does. One thing I learned, way after I left *The Face*, was the need to try to understand what would be a good result for the client, rather than trying to talk them into something that might not even be right for them, just because you and the photographer have decided it would be a cool thing to do. I probably used to do that, but now I find it really interesting on a traditional advertising level: what's good for the client, what can give them a good result, and if you can use some of your expertise and experience to achieve that result, then I think that's really satisfying. In all of the bigger brand stuff I've worked on, in the grand scheme of things, did anyone realize or notice it?

Thomas: That's more interesting than essentially talking to your peers?

Lee: It satisfies different parts of the brain. Maybe there's more of a conversation when you're talking to your peers, more of a creative exchange going on. It's definitely different parts of my brain, and it's definitely satisfying different aspects. I'm truly enjoying myself when I talk about these old magazine projects, and now we're working on British *Vogue*, it's about how we can bring some of our look and feel from our other magazine projects to *Vogue*. It will be interesting if you ask me this question in six months or a year because that is the brief: to change the way it looks and bring some of that look and feel, but completely mindful of the fact that British *Vogue* is a very successful *Vogue* magazine within the marketplace.

Thomas: Which person working within the fashion industry do you most admire and why?

Lee: Perhaps it's not a very original answer for an art director, but I love Alexey Brodovitch.[8]

Thomas: So far, you're the first to say Brodovitch.

Lee: No way! When I discovered his work, I was, like, 'Oh yeah, well, this guy's got it. He's figured it all out. He's got all the answers. I don't need to look any further.' The answers are just there. It's incredible, really. All my influences are art directors: like Henry Wolf, the other American art director.[9] I

> **'I've learned to understand what would be good for the client, rather than doing something the photographer and I think would be cool.'**

love all those old *Esquire* and *Vogue* and *Bazaar*. I *loved* magazines when I was growing up. I was super passionate about them.

Thomas: Words and images together.

Lee: Exactly.

Thomas: What does success look like for you?

Lee: Just being creatively satisfied is a massive part of that. It's nice to connect and communicate with people. Working on *The Face*, you definitely felt you were having a conversation with the readers, and that was before you could literally speak to them. I mean, now you can really speak to people. But we felt that back then. There's still nothing more exciting than to have an idea and work with a team of people to make it come to life. I feel that with this portfolio I've just done with Sølve. I could see the thing in my head and was wondering, 'Could we make that happen? Could that come to life?' And then I second-guessed myself the next day: 'No, that's stupid and crazy.' And then I came back to it a few hours later: 'No, it's great, let's do it!' I like that process. It's also nice when clients are happy with the work you've done for them – I should say that as well!

> **'I guess the question is: will the pandemic cause some kind of cultural shift? It's got to, right? It's just got to. I think it will affect everything.'**

Thomas: Describe a professional disappointment and what it taught you.

Lee: I suppose early on in my career when I was doing *The Face* – I keep talking about *The Face*, which isn't something I intended to do – I started getting work on advertising projects. I didn't really care that about it, because I was just enjoying doing *The Face* and this was just extra money. There were a few shoots in Paris or Milan when me and the photographer thought we were doing a great job, but the client complained or really didn't like the picture. I later realized what we were doing: we were still trying to make images for *The Face*, rather than trying to create pictures for the client. At the time, I didn't give a shit. I was young and arrogant, and I didn't care that they were upset. Looking back, I had to go through that, but I wasn't doing such a great job!

Thomas: You disappointed your client, but you didn't…

Lee: What was disappointing to me? I can't think of anything! My memory is so fragmented. There's sure to be something we tried to do that fell apart. Obviously, I've forgotten about it.

Thomas: As things gradually return to some level of normality, will your impulse be to explore notions of fantasy and escapism or will you be more inclined to double down on realism and documenting the moment?

Lee: That's a really good question. What's interesting about working on a magazine that has a regular schedule, like *Vogue*, is that we're having to think about that almost every day, because at least two issues are going to be published during the lockdown. I guess the question is: will the pandemic cause some kind of cultural shift? It's got to, right? It's just got to. I think it will affect everything. Do you think the shows are going to survive?

Thomas: Whether the shows survive or not, the biggest issue is not, in my opinion, how they look, it's how you transcribe them. There's a complete lack of talent in reformatting the thing and making it a cinematic experience.

Lee: Do you still go to them?

Thomas: Sometimes, and they can be quite exciting if you don't go all the time. You know as well as I do that there's a nicheness and such a weird atmosphere. It's so tense, so bizarre, so odd; it's like nothing else in the world, really. Do you go?

Lee: I went to a few in Paris last season just for *Vogue*. I didn't mind dipping in and out; I couldn't do the whole week. Nothing really changes. I still had some cheeky older lady or someone from some obscure fashion magazine trying to steal my seat. So, nothing really changes, but I was there as an observer. I was just quite interested to see that the dynamic hasn't really changed that much. A good fashion show is like being at a good rock show or something.

Thomas: I'm not debating the merits of the spectacle when you're at the show, I'm just wondering why no one thought it might be a good idea to make it exciting to watch if you're not there.

Lee: With the way the world has been accelerated through the pandemic, and everyone is doing video conferences like we are now, it just seems that all these big communal events are really going to have to justify themselves. People are always going to go watch a football match, but I wonder if the logistics of doing fashion shows are going to keep making sense.

Thomas: Honestly, I'm not quite sure what purpose they still serve.

Lee: When you see the stills or the films, it often just looks like ever-younger models looking quite bored. You just don't get any feeling at all.

Thomas: Like they've completely lost interest. There's an interesting commercial space for creative directors to figure out a way to literally put that together, to work on how to make a film out of it. Are you itching to get back to pre-Covid-19 processes? The ability to say, 'OK, I'll go to New York and shoot with Steven Meisel and Pat McGrath.'

Lee: The travel thing is going to be messed up for so long. I don't personally miss travelling a lot, but I'm sure I will in a few months, because it just keeps things interesting.

Thomas: And lastly: do you think it's possible to be truly unique today, and does that even matter?

Lee: Yes and yes: it's possible to be unique and it does matter. There are still people making original music, films, photographs, graphics, magazines. When something good and new comes along, you look at it and go, 'Oh, that's really obvious, why did no one do it before?' Your magazine was a new thing that didn't exist, but it now feels very much part of the furniture, right? You did it. You came up with something new, and it's important.

1. First appearing in 1990, Madman, also known as Frank Einstein, is a comic-book character created by Mike Allred.

2. Jean Colonna founded his label in 1987, won the Andam Fashion Award in 1991, and by 1993, his shabby-chic grunge style saw him described as the 'popularist of *Drugstore Cowboy* fashion' in the *New York Times*. He closed the label in 2002, relaunched it in 2015, before closing it again in 2018. 'You have to stop at the right time,' he told *Le Figaro* in 2019. 'That doesn't mean I'll never do fashion again. It's just that as things stand, I no longer enjoy it.'

3. 'The Fashion Heroes', the October 1989 issue of *The Face*, had a cover image and story by photographer Stéphane Sednaoui that featured Jean Paul Gaultier, Martine Sitbon, Vivienne Westwood, Thierry Mugler and 'Azzadine Alaia' (as the cover text misspelt it) as superheroes.

4. Mondino's 'gangster' story, 'Reality Bites', was published in the June 1994 issue of *The Face* (with Kylie Minogue on the cover). Its aesthetic does indeed have parallels with the look of Baz Luhrmann's 1996 Shakespeare adaptation *Romeo + Juliet*, with the two warring houses dressed by costume designer Kym Barrett in different labels: the Capulets generally wear Dolce & Gabbana; the Montagues mainly Prada.

5. The ELECTRO cover was for the May 1984 issue of *The Face*, which also featured stories about Quincy Jones and Ken Livingstone.

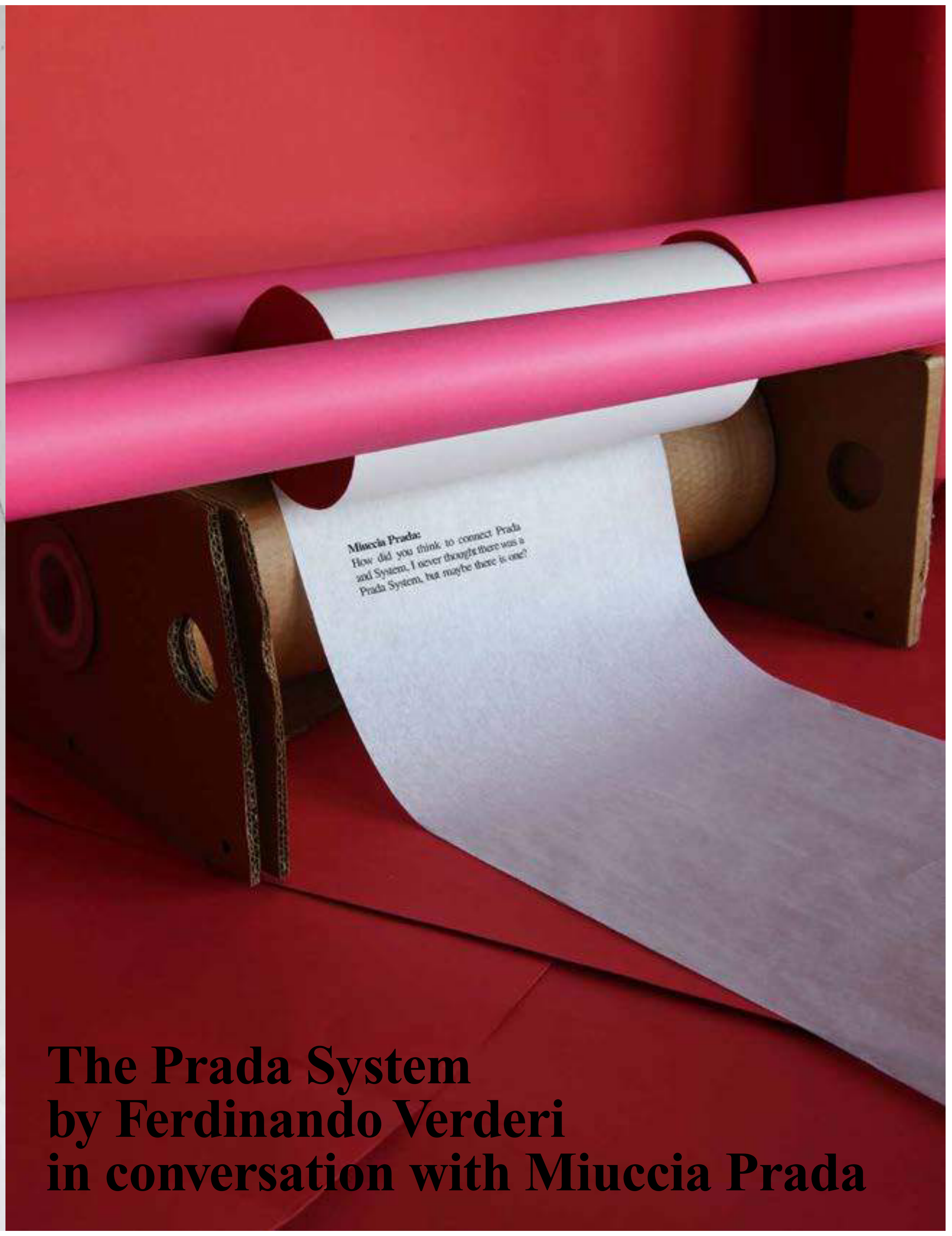
6. Ray Petri was a stylist and designer who in 1984 founded Buffalo, a London-based underground, multicultural, multidisciplinary creative collective. It was active until 1989, the year when Petri died.

7. 'The new kind of magazine for a new kind of woman', *Nova* was a British feminist style magazine founded in 1965. Known for its cutting-edge photography, design and writing, it was art directed by David Hillman from 1969 until the magazine's closure in 1975.

8. Alexey Brodovitch (1898-1971) was a legendary graphic designer, photographer and teacher who art directed *Harper's Bazaar* for nearly 25 years and inspired the character Dovitch in Stanley Donan's film *Funny Face*.

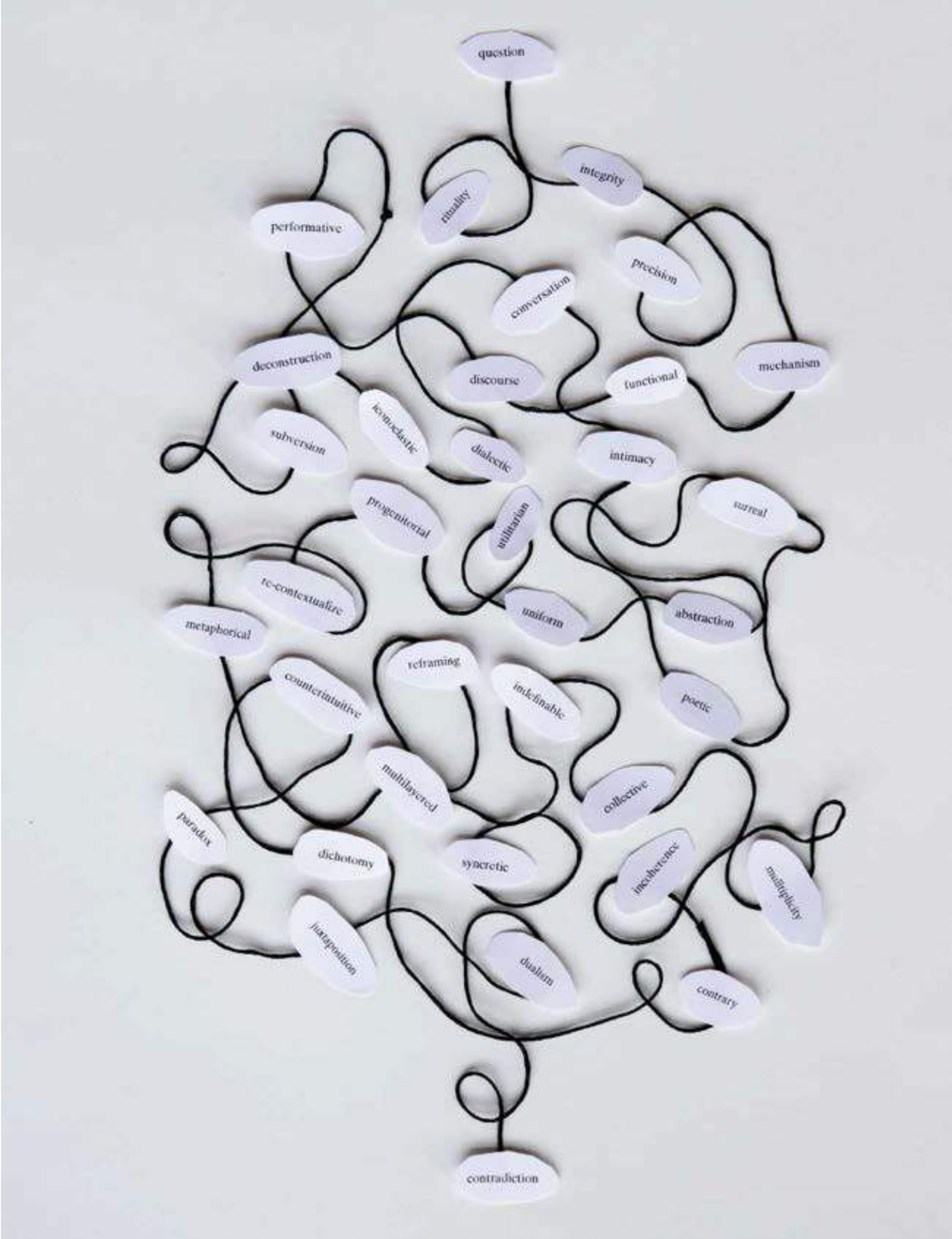
9. Vienna-born, New York-based art director Henry Wolf (1925-2005) worked at *Esquire* and *Harper's Bazaar* in the 1950s and 1960s. He was known for his use of typography and conceptual illustration. He once said, 'A magazine should not only reflect a trend; it should help start it.'

the
PRADA
System



Miuccia Prada:
How did you think to connect Prada and System, I never thought there was a Prada System, but maybe there is one?

The Prada System
by Ferdinando Verderi
in conversation with Miuccia Prada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re-contextualize
metaphorical
uniform
abstraction
reframing
counterintuitive
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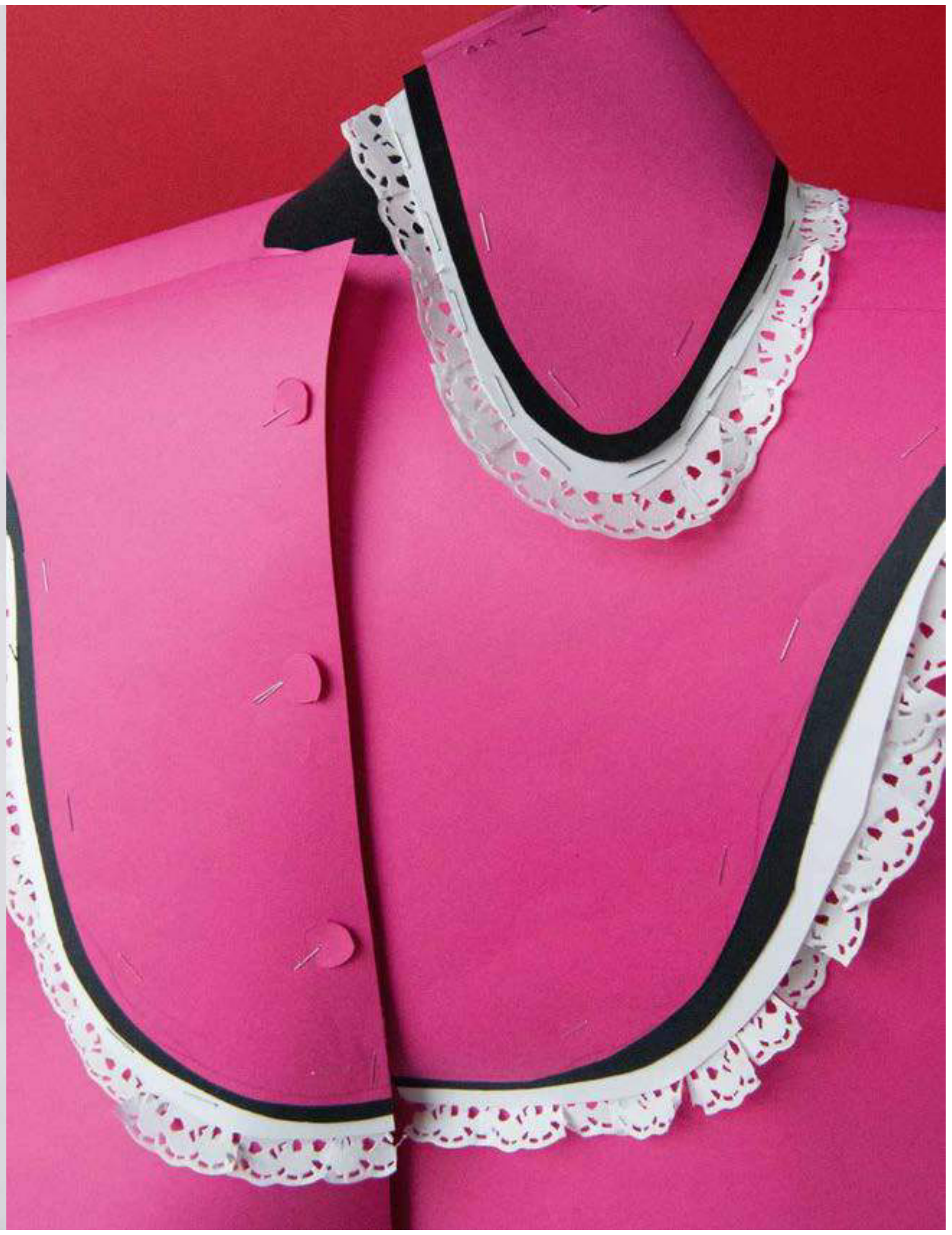
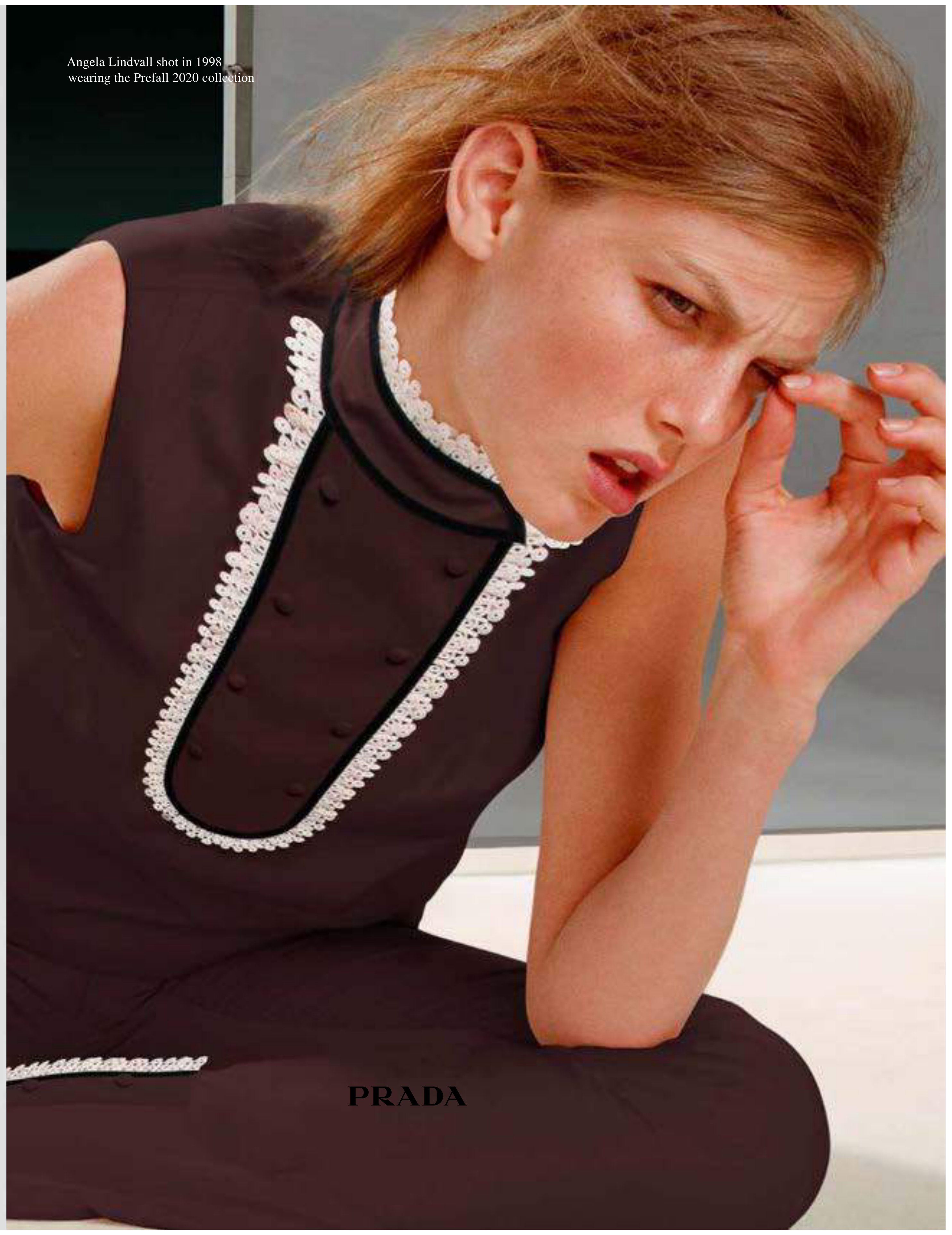
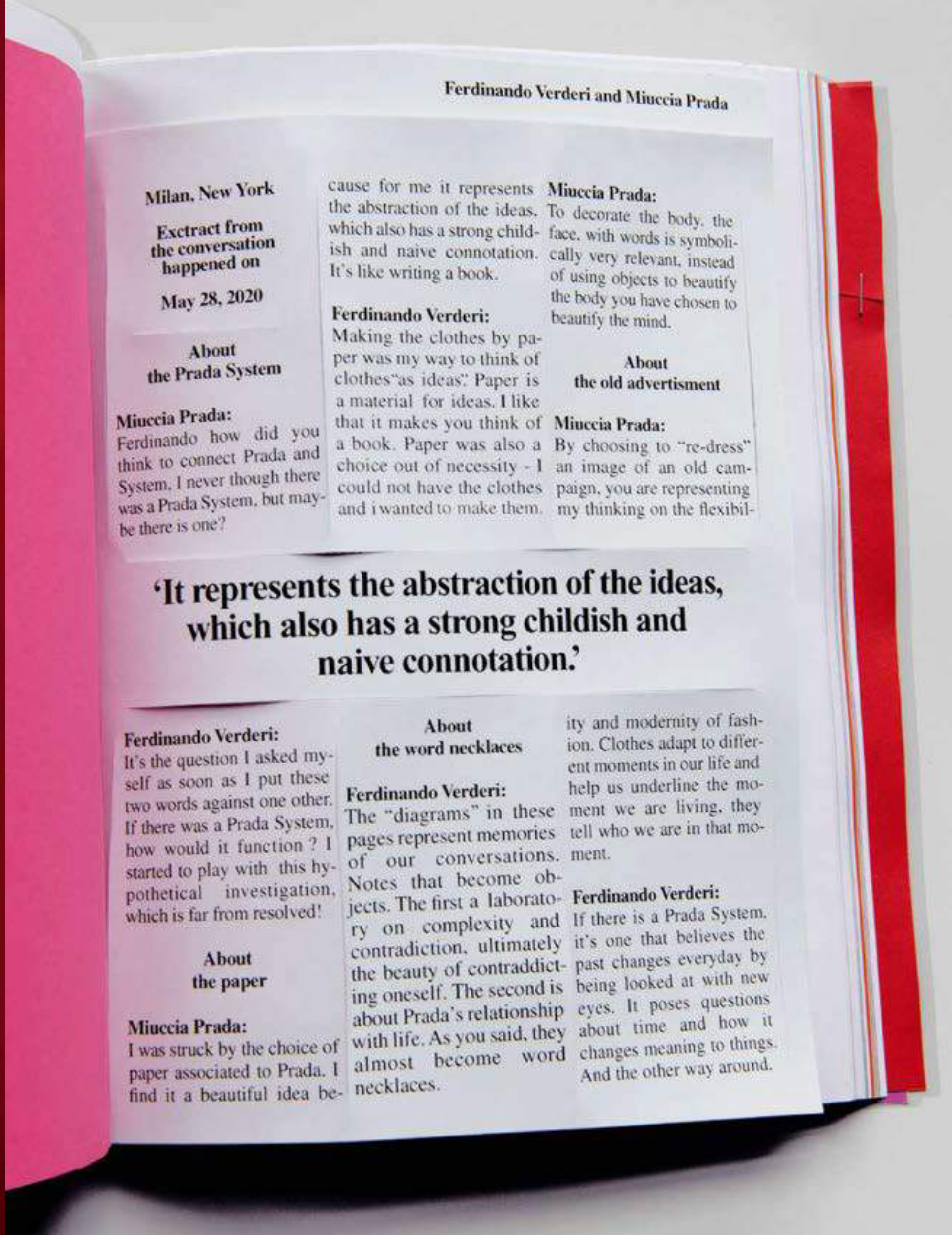




Angela Lindvall shot in 1998
wearing the Prefall 2020 collection



Milan, New York

Exctract from the conversation happened on

May 28, 2020

About the Prada System

Miuccia Prada:
Ferdinando how did you think to connect Prada and System, I never though there was a Prada System, but maybe there is one?

Ferdinando Verderi:
It's the question I asked myself as soon as I put these two words against one other. If there was a Prada System, how would it function ? I started to play with this hypothetical investigation, which is far from resolved!

About the paper

Miuccia Prada:
I was struck by the choice of paper associated to Prada. I find it a beautiful idea because for me it represents the abstraction of the ideas, which also has a strong childish and naive connotation. It's like writing a book.

Ferdinando Verderi:
Making the clothes by paper was my way to think of clothes"as ideas". Paper is a material for ideas. I like that it makes you think of a book. Paper was also a choice out of necessity - I could not have the clothes and i wanted to make them.

About the word necklaces

Ferdinando Verderi:
The "diagrams" in these pages represent memories of our conversations. Notes that become objects. The first a laboratory on complexity and contradiction, ultimately the beauty of contraddicting oneself. The second is about Prada's relationship with life. As you said, they almost become word necklaces.

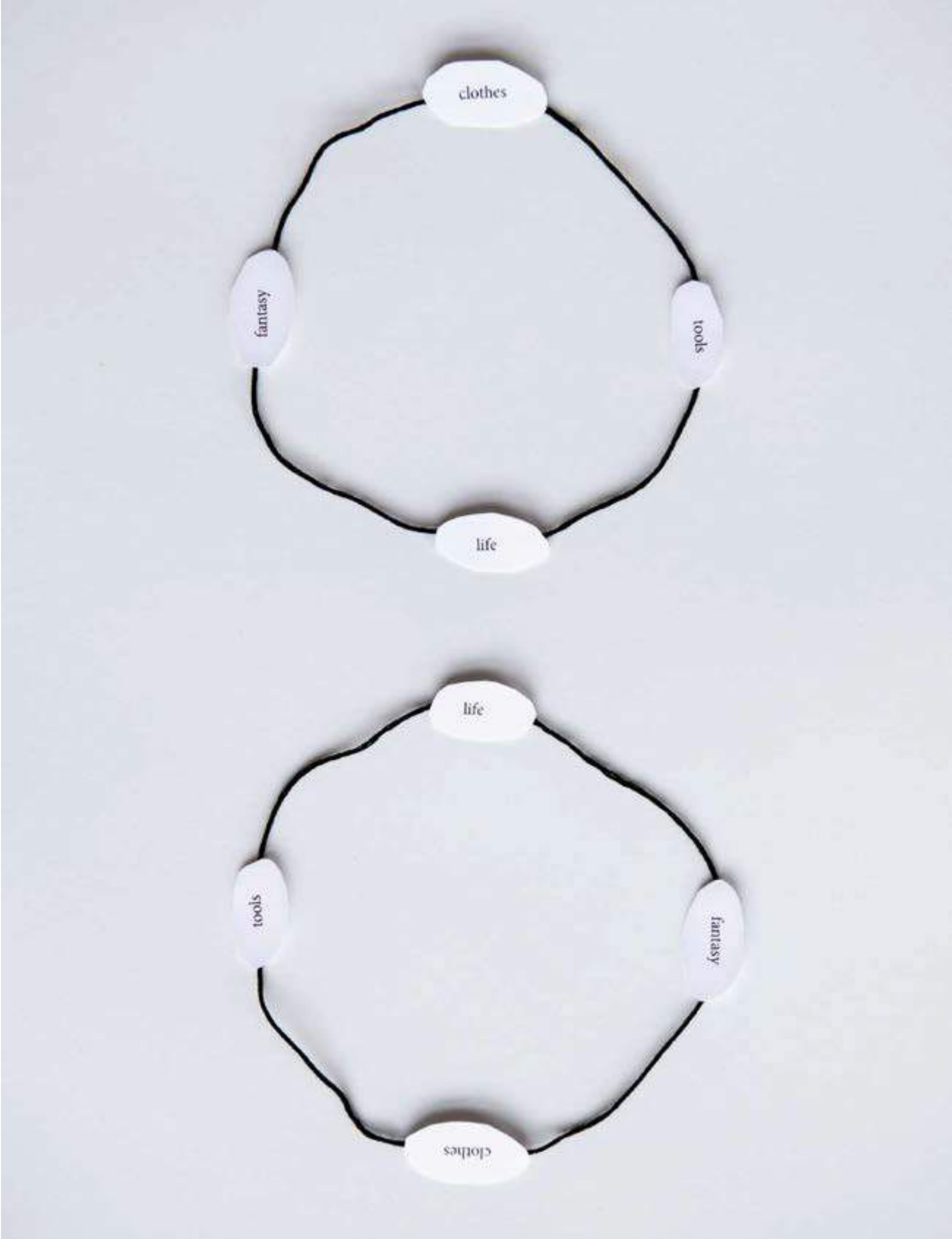
Miuccia Prada:
To decorate the body, the face, with words is symbolically very relevant, instead of using objects to beautify the body you have chosen to beautify the mind.

About the old advertisment

Miuccia Prada:
By choosing to "re-dress" an image of an old campaign, you are representing my thinking on the flexibility and modernity of fashion. Clothes adapt to different moments in our life and help us underline the moment we are living, they tell who we are in that moment.

Ferdinando Verderi:
If there is a Prada System, it's one that believes the past changes everyday by being looked at with new eyes. It poses questions about time and how it changes meaning to things. And the other way around.

'It represents the abstraction of the ideas, which also has a strong childish and naive connotation.'



clothes
fantasy
tools
life
life
tools
fantasy
clothes

Paper objects and photography by Ferdinando Verderi
Conversation by Ferdinando Verderi and Miuccia Prada
All clothes inspired by Prada Prefall 2020
Model Sara Blomqvist

1998 Prada archive image of Angela Lindvall by Norbert Schoerner
2016 *System* archive cover image by Juergen Teller

Thanks to Ben Ganz, Guillaume Boucher, Daniël Sumarna, e.o.o

PRADA
Everybody
loves Systems

‘I don’t feel that I really have a style, but I definitely have a process.’

A conversation with
Ferdinando Verderi, 22 May 2020.

Thomas Lenthal: First of all, thank you for having responded so positively to *System*’s proposal. You seem really enthusiastic about it.

Ferdinando Verderi: The reason I liked this invitation was, first of all, because after all the fashion weeks, I saw it as the opportunity to do something without a set goal, which felt refreshing. Soon after, my whole mindset completely shifted with Covid. That changed my whole perception of this project. All of a sudden, limitations began to appear. The biggest was self-isolation, which was putting me in an introspective, rather than enthusiastic mood. It felt like a chance to do something by myself. The second situation that arose was the impossibility of getting my hands on any clothes. As the constraints started to take shape in my mind, it started to feel like a project with a lot of internal traction. So I started to apply my typical process to it. First of all, I wanted to put Prada and *System*, these two entities, at play, and really get to the essence of things. Usually I work with a single entity in which I’m trying to find a certain tension. In this case, however, it was binary. That seemed like an opportunity to do something that could only be done in this situation. I narrowed it down to two words and I saw the chance to investigate a hypothetical ‘Prada system’: that was the conflict that I wanted to work with. It was my first idea and I stuck to it. Immediately, there was an obvious question at the heart of the project because there was a huge limitation forcing me to return to the essence of creativity: ‘What do I do when I can’t do what I’m supposed to do?’ I decided to make the clothes from paper, as it felt like the one medium I could play with to make clothes. I know you gave me all the freedom in the world, but I didn’t want to run away from what an editorial is usually about, which is the clothes. There was the physical challenge of trying to make these clothes. That obviously implied a naive and impulsive process that challenged me; there wasn’t really any science applied to any of this. I made the clothes from memory and that sense of naivety made sense in contrast to Prada’s intellectual processes. In this project, I wanted to create a juxtaposition between the complexity and abstraction of the brand and the primitiveness of how I brought it to life. Prada to me is both. The whole portfolio is like a canvas on which I am having a conversation with Mrs Prada. That was part of the plan from the beginning: I created these clothes and these diagrams as a starting point for a conversation.

‘Fashion has this mundane quality of being something looked down upon, but it also has a visceral power that makes people love it. I love that contradiction.’

Thomas: One thing that has always impressed me with Prada is the relationship between its size and the level of complexity and sophistication in everything it does, makes, imagines, and wants. It has an almost revolutionary attitude towards the contemporary world and the world of fashion: it’s a top-10 brand that operates almost with the ethos of a tiny brand. I find it very brave that it appears not to worry about being puzzling, while the contemporary commercial world gets less puzzling.

Ferdinando: The reason I relate to it and feel this chemical attraction is because Prada has led as a challenger brand; it has challenged the status quo and conventions of fashion. It has demonstrated that beauty is a philosophical concept, and that a brand can remain an independent thinker. It thinks against convention. What I try to bring out in my work for Prada is the independent voice of a challenger, one that defies scale and the idea of a single-minded definition of itself, one that embraces fragmentation and rejects the idea that things are finished, perfect and sealed. In a way, this editorial brings that to life too. It’s obviously not an advertisement; it comes from a different place. Things start for me with an intuition, which is obviously very immediate, then I reverse the process and articulate the thoughts that allow me to understand what the idea really means. After that I need to make sure that none of this comes across, so that when you see it you can still love it during the few seconds you’re exposed to it.

Thomas: That’s what I had in mind. There is a depth of meaning that is elaborate and complex, yet solid. And that gives birth to something that is incredibly direct, yet conceptually strong and has a measure of enduring humanity. It’s sentimental, yet deeply intellectual, which few people are able to bring together.

Ferdinando: This portfolio has become a quick example of how my process typically works. I’ve tried to understand what it means, but I don’t have an answer; it’s just an investigation. I don’t feel that I really have a style, but I definitely have a process. It’s ridiculous to say I’m an outsider, but I try to maintain an outsider’s perspective, one that tries to mess with things a little. I have a sense of depth and respect, but I always try to create a little trouble. I want to test the limits. That’s why I do it, to test the limits until they break, not aesthetically, just conceptually.

‘It’s ridiculous to say I’m an outsider, but I do try to maintain an outsider’s perspective, one that tries to mess with things a little.’

Thomas: I’m interested in the notion of constraint. I guess that you’re the one building the constraints. I don’t see you being subjected to a lot of constraints.

Ferdinando: Most people in our profession have a design background, they can do things themselves. I have zero technical skills. I have a very theoretical background. There’s nothing artistic in my studies at all. I studied economics. My high school was focused on philosophy, Latin and Greek. That stayed with me as a mental pattern, because obviously that’s where your way of thinking is formed. I studied economics at university, which was almost like a prank I played on myself. I did something I completely hated, I wanted to see how far I could push it, learning to like something. That went a bit far, but it left me knowing what I wanted to do, which was this, even if I had none of the supposed necessary skills. I had to create skills differently, and my thinking process is my skill. I became better at articulating my intuition and explaining it to others in a way that it becomes tangible even if it remains formless. Soon after, I started to work with people who could give shape to things. Before that, it had been hard for me to give form to something, so I forced myself to stay abstract with ideas. When I work, I don’t use images until very late in the process; I just use words. I do meetings with words, to explain where the idea comes from. I am interested in where the tension lies.

Thomas: You’re saying you’re very conceptual and not involved in material things, yet the notion of the handmade is extremely present in the graphic solutions you find.

Ferdinando: That’s because I had to accept that the only way to bring things to life directly was to use my hands. It was a limit I had to cope with. I had fun doing this editorial with my hands. Actually, I felt at home, because my whole perspective is formed by this limit.

Thomas: I can think of at least two of our esteemed colleagues who have absolutely no technological skills: Marc Ascoli and Peter Saville. Marc Ascoli only uses words, but in the way a poet would use words; he’s not conceptual in your sense. Meanwhile, Peter Saville has to rely on other graphic designers because he can’t use a computer either. It’s so interesting that three creative directors who I consider to be among the more interesting of our times happen to have limited digital design skills.

Ferdinando: My mistake, my perverse detour, is the reason why I can now express myself a certain way. I still cope with that paradox, but I don’t think it’s because of it, it’s regardless of it. I’m not giving all the credit to the limitations, but there is an argument for it.

Thomas: This notion of limitation is crucial and interesting, I was talking about constraints within the commercial world, the kind of constraints we quite often have to deal with, and wanting to better understand whether you saw constraints, like a brief, as interesting or a nuisance, something that needs to be questioned.

Ferdinando: I get so involved in the DNA of a client and try to visualize it so much that I almost come up with a brief myself, a parallel personal brief. It’s not that my clients don’t give me the brief, they do, but I have my own in mind as well. It starts from trying to break those limits or trying to bend them until they break. For me, a constraint is a necessity. When this editorial came, the constraint became obvious very quickly – there were no clothes – but I was going to look for something else to test, for sure.

Thomas: You said that this was what you always wanted to do. When did that become clear in your mind?

Ferdinando: I didn’t know what I wanted to do, but this felt inevitable. I have definitely always been attracted by fashion as a window into self-expression that would allow a fast-paced rhythm. I sometimes think I would have been an architect if I’d had more patience; I really love architecture, but fashion is a contradiction, and I love that. It has this mundane quality of being something looked down upon, but it also has this visceral power that makes everybody love it. I’ve also always been fascinated by the idea of an industry that has its own rules. Fashion images captured me very early in my life and there were a few that really struck me in my teens.

Thomas: Which photographers’ work struck you in that way?

Ferdinando: If I had to narrow it down to two in fashion, it would have to be Juergen Teller and David Sims, in different ways. They are two different individuals, but I felt that they both had something extremely subversive. I loved the fact that David Sims was basically creating independent images within the system and I loved that Juergen had a process that felt completely free and made the system need him. They embodied this contradiction that I thought was brilliant. There were also the photographs of Thomas Ruff or later Wolfgang Tillmans, which brought other things together: the idea of authenticity, objectivity and truth, the idea that an everyday image can be abstract and the fact that an image is an object. There were layers of complexity that suited my interest. I was living in a provincial town in Italy. I had never met a photographer; I was years away from meeting anyone in this world.

‘This portfolio is like a canvas on which I’m having a conversation with Mrs Prada. I created clothes and diagrams as a starting point for a conversation.’

Thomas: Why don’t you take photographs yourself?

Ferdinando: Because I don’t feel the need for more photographs. I’m more interested in testing the limits of a form that an idea can take and in testing the limits of collaboration, than in doing things myself. It’s part of the whole game I play, seeing where things bend.

Thomas: But you’ve directed many of your own films.

Ferdinando: I don’t see myself as a director, nor my films as films. I just see these things as the expression of an idea. I started with the *Versace, Versace, Versace* film, which was the first directing I did. I had this idea that was very simple in my head, but had to be precise. So I had to do it myself. Then it became something that I was asked to do more and more. Every time the process is about being true to the idea.

Thomas: Another creative director was saying that the fashion world was actually parochial and conventional.

Ferdinando: It’s also a generational thing. My generation grew up in a world with these hugely prestigious giants who you couldn’t imagine challenging. Then all of a sudden, you have no choice but to challenge them.

Thomas: It’s interesting that in an industry that prides itself on being creative, the processes that have been in place for a while now are fairly stifling. So you can arrive with a measure of innocence that is a strength.

Ferdinando: I have to believe that or I’ll have to become an economics professor. In a way, I feel like you’re better off doing things that you don’t know a lot about. I mean, I have a deep fashion culture, but I didn’t have a very deep culture of the process of creative direction in fashion. When I was a teenager, I would read the credits in fashion magazines until the magazine fell apart, but I had no idea how someone would work to create it. I had no idea this profession existed until later. I never actually worked until I started working. I was in an academic environment. My head was completely somewhere else, until I started working on a project with two friends. We had this very experimental set-up and were trying to challenge the status quo of communications. For me, fashion was the target. I felt that what the world was going through needed to happen in fashion, too. I said, ‘I am a fashion person and I feel the need for change. I can’t be the only one who needs ideas to be multi-layered, for things to be challenging, for things to be wrong, in a way.’ So I just started there, after two months someone from a very major brand reached out. They were looking for new people with new ideas and I began in the middle of that world, at the very centre of it, behind the scenes. I created my own experience by working with the president of that company on ideas. Not on execution, just ideas and creative strategies.

Thomas: Let’s return to your portfolio. Can you talk me through it?

Ferdinando: One of the images is 20 years old from Prada with Angela Lindvall, to which we applied the new clothes. It’s a bit of a break in the narrative, because it’s important to show the relationship with the past. I feel like that image is a bit of a time warp because you instantly question the relevance of images and their timelessness. It’s an image that could feel new now because people are copying that style, but it also feels very dated because you’ve seen it before. The collection is new, so you wonder: was the new collection a reference to the old one? No, it wasn’t, but it absolutely looks like it could be. It creates a lot of questions that I think Prada is perfectly comfortable with and which I love. I wanted just to hint at one of the conversations; it’s like a deep dive into a different train of thought that I’m having. The other things are these mind-maps that are part of my larger discussion with Mrs Prada. One starts from this idea of contradiction; it just has everything in between. It definitely acknowledges the beauty of the Prada process’s complexity and its comfort with that complexity. Then there’s another image, which I find even more important. I wanted it to be simple and precise: it’s about the relationship between the idea of fantasy and reality, and the idea of clothes and tools. The idea is that clothes are tools for life and life is a place where your fantasies can be realized. Fantasies allow you to create new clothes in the case of Mrs Prada or Fabio [Zambernardi], or dream about wearing new clothes in case of anyone else. In the context of this project, it’s important to remind ourselves of a sense of reality and how something so practical as clothes-as-tools and something so evanescent as the idea of fantasy can co-exist. Perfectly coexisting in the circle of life. For the rest of the images I just wanted to show the clothes.

‘As a teenager, I’d read the credits in fashion magazines until the magazine fell apart, but I had no idea how someone would create that.’

Thomas: You took the pictures?

Ferdinando: Yeah, I took the pictures at home.

Thomas: You say you have no skills, but you take pictures, you make films and you put type together. You have all the skills! What are you talking about?

Ferdinando: All these things are quite instinctive; they were led by necessity. The model, Sara Blomqvist, kindly took part. She’s part of the Prada community. The creative relationship we have is based on the Prada woman. She is in it as another element of the Prada system.

Thomas: And the colour red?

Ferdinando: That just happened. I had it at home. The most striking piece of this collection is pink. I loved the wrongness of pink and red. Nothing special about it, it just worked well in the first image. I started to feel that a palette was forming because one piece of clothing was pink, another that I wanted to shoot was brown, the printer object was brown, so I added pink and put red behind it. That’s all we needed. There’s another piece where the skirt was pink and it just became an exercise in reduction, even the palette. So I forced myself to use these three colours.

Thomas: A question that jumps to my mind at this point. You live in New York. How do all your concepts of complexity, multi-layered meanings, ambiguity, and poetry work in contemporary America? I’m not talking politics, but what is the commercial merit of this sort of attitude in contemporary America?

Ferdinando: New York is now very much part of my identity, 100%, even though the people I’m working with now are in Europe. New York has this dynamic that questions status, and is now fundamental to me. I could not do the same work if I were in Europe. Sometimes I think New York is my biggest love. I made some really hard choices for this city, but I do owe a lot to it. New York pushes things to their maximum level. I’m very comfortable with a place that is a lot of everything or very little of anything. For me, Europe just feels too familiar, because I was born there, not because of the way it is. New York continues to feel like something extreme, a place that loves extreme natures, emotion, energy, competition, rhythm, density, diversity, and a desire for social progress. It’s important for me to be in extreme places. If I wasn’t here, I’d probably be somewhere completely isolated.

Thomas: So you’re channelling New York energy into European brands without being American in the way you approach things. That’s what I find puzzling and unique in your position.

Ferdinando: My professional identity is really connected to New York. There are things that I developed here. Like this fascination for the paradox of something being extremely commercial and extremely independent or avant-garde. This is something I feel New York is made of, and which has made me who I am.

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